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Chapter 1

Introduction: Transformative Museum Experiences at a Time of Transformation



Amalia Sabiescu, Licia Calvi, and Arnold Vermeeren

Abstract This introductory chapter contextualises and reflects critically on the emerging trends characterising the evolving social role advocated by museums in society, with an emphasis on museum experiences as vehicles for change or transformation. It looks at transformation by adopting a systemic perspective, anchored in the transformative potential of the experiences that museums offer to visitors, and then zooming out to turn attention towards the way recent changes in the socio-political and cultural context reverberated in structural and functional changes inside the museum and connected institutions and communities. The chapter is structured along a series of questions, starting by unpacking a rationale for transformative experiences and why they are worthy of attention at this particular moment (Why), then focusing on what we mean by transformative experiences in the context of museums (What), on particularities of design approaches and supporting technologies for crafting transformative experiences (How), and closing with reflections on the meaning and significance of it all, for the museum, the visitor, diverse audience groups and society as a whole (For whom and For what). The final part of the Introduction then reviews these themes once again, narrating how they are woven in the book narrative.

Keywords Digital transformation · Museum ecosystems · Museum experience design · Museum learning · Social role of museums · Transformative museum experiences

In 2018, our jointly edited book *Museum Experience Design* captured a series of trends shaping the museum world and the experiences offered within, all subsumed

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to the pivotal change in the role and function of the museum, from being collection-centred to being audience-oriented and community-centred. This shift was instantiated by a series of movements affecting not only museums, but society as a whole, from the rapid evolution of technological opportunities for experience design to new ways of acknowledging and involving the public—ranging from crowdsourcing, adopted on a large scale by various cultural and social organisations (van der Lans et al. 2018; Wrigglesworth and Watts 2018) to initiatives recognising the role of and engaging local communities. These shifts, we proposed, also set in motion structural changes inside the museum (Sabiescu 2018; Sabiescu and Charatzopoulou 2018) and outside, integrating museums in interconnected ecosystems alongside other social, educational but also private technology organisations that expanded exponentially the realms of what is possible to offer as a ‘museum experience’ (Calvi and Hover 2018; Vermeeren et al. 2018a; Rozendaal et al. 2018).

Since 2018, this vortex of change has continued, partly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and partly triggered by shifts and movements within the museum world itself as reflected by the recently adopted new ICOM definition (<https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>) of what a museum is. Beyond definitions, local museum strategies see the museum shape shifting to position itself distinctively as a “start-up hub” (Murphy 2018), an “activist museum” (Bergevin 2018), a “social agora” (Baggesen 2014) or an educational centre hosting a diversity of experiences from creative entrepreneurship to place-making and locality, experientiality and transformations (Garner et al. 2016).

With this new book, we aim to acknowledge these changes and to reflect critically on the emerging trends, especially those related to the new role advocated by museums in society and its emphasis on experiences as vehicles for change. Thus, the central focus of this new volume on museum experience design is on change and transformation, analysed through a systemic perspective, anchored in the experiences that museums offer to visitors. One facet of our exploration regards the museum experience itself as an instrument for change, and at this level we conceptualise what we mean by a *transformative experience* and look at design approaches specifically geared towards inducing transformation. We then turn attention towards the way recent changes in the socio-political and cultural context reverberated in structural and functional changes inside the museum and connected institutions and communities, with shifting museum identities and social roles and new connections, forms of cooperation and partnerships emerging (Sabiescu and Zajzon 2023). Finally, we zoom in on the role of mediation and technology in the making of transformative museum experiences, looking at opportunities and affordances but also calling for an approach to integration of new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence informed by ethical considerations mindful of long-term consequences (in this volume, Chap. 12 by Anders Løvlie et al. and Chap. 13 by Kathryn Brown).

The remainder of this introductory chapter proceeds by unpacking a rationale for transformative experiences and why they are worthy of attention at this particular moment (*Why*), then focuses on what we mean by *transformative experiences* in the context of museums (*What*), on particularities of design approaches and supporting technologies for crafting transformative experiences (*How*), closing with reflections

on the meaning and significance of it all, for the museum, the visitor, diverse audience groups and society as a whole (*For whom* and *For what*).

The final part of the Introduction then reviews these themes once again, narrating how they are woven in the book narrative, throughout the following 12 chapters.

1.1 Why Transformative Museum Experiences?

In her book, *Museum metamorphosis*, US-based arts consultant and educator Nico Wheadon argues that not only isolated museums, but rather the entire “museum industrial complex is at a critical juncture”, an ecosystem being put in the position to change amidst the rising uncertainty and instability affecting the global socio-political system and tensions experienced locally (Wheadon 2022, p. 1). Similar ideas are echoed by other museum researchers and professionals, in dynamic dialogue with increasingly bold, transformative practices and missions assumed by museums both large and small, as they come to acknowledge the weight of their role as social, community, cultural institutions with a responsibility to carry forth agendas of equity, diversity and social justice (e.g., collection of case studies in Samis and Michaelson 2016; special issue on museums and change by Mac Devitt 2016; special issue by Altayli and Viau-Courville 2018a). In the present book, we focus on this agenda for change and zoom in on the centrepiece of the museum offering for visitors and society: the *experience*. In our view, the pinnacle of the changing role of museums in society resides in the transformative experiences they offer: museums are changing themselves and increasingly engage in dialogues that affect social perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour (e.g., Bull 2020; Lynch 2017; Mac Devitt 2016). While in the next section of this introductory chapter we will elaborate at length on what we mean by and how we conceptualise *transformative museum experiences*, in this part we start by examining how museums approach issues of transformation and change in their practices and how these reflect their foundational missions and agendas. By looking at some high-profile cases, our aim in this section is to sketch a rationale for museums to include transformative museum experiences in their agendas, in other words, to engage in visitor transformation. As we shall argue further, there is a thin boundary between having an implicit or an explicit agenda for transformation and it all comes down to how we define it. For instance, the International Council of Museums (ICOM)’s newest definition of museums (<https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>) outlines their social and ethical responsibility, stating that museums should be “accessible and inclusive” and “foster diversity and sustainability”. The definition also captures the centrepiece museum function of offering “experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing” (<https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>). Thus, an agenda for playing an active social role potentially related to transformation might be implicit, though not explicitly spelled out in the ICOM definition. If we take this definition as a baseline, then by their foundational mission museums should become hubs for diversity, inclusivity and accessibility and offer experiences

that build knowledge and encourage reflexivity. But is there a threshold by which museums adopt transformative agendas explicitly in their mission statements or for special projects and exhibitions, actively engaging with visitor transformation or more broadly with issues of social justice and social change?

Scholarly and practitioner literatures abound in examples that capture the manifold ways by which museum experiences may become transformative, and why museums are specifically including transformation in their strategic agendas. Peter Samis and Mimi Michaelson's book (2016) is an excellent compendium of case studies of community-oriented actions spearheaded by museums in the UK and the US, subsumed to an ethos and overarching frame of visitor-centeredness. The *Museum International* special issue on *Museums and Contested Histories* (2018b) shows how, when involved in the (re-)interpretation and negotiation of contested historical narratives, museums might go one step further, not limiting themselves to being exegesis arbiters, but actually stepping out in the arena to provide new platforms for silenced voices, offer experiences that challenge preconceptions and support dialogues to overcome fractured social and ethnic relationships. The articles in the collection unpack cases with a local scope, yet with echoes that connect to global realities. For instance, Albert's article (2018) looks at how the Museu d'Història de Barcelona's (MUHBA) contributed to re-writing the urban history of the city of Barcelona by including a previously ignored narrative, that of the informal settlement of Turó de la Rovira, located in the outskirts of the city for more than 50 years, until the 1990s. MUHBA's exhibition *Barraques, la ciutat informal*, held at *Casa Padellàs* in 2008 offered a platform for communicating for the first time in a coherent narrative the story of the settlement and its community battles and achievements. Locally, it inspired several projects and citizen initiatives around the history of shanty towns. The case reported in Albert's article is just one example of the local instantiation of a social issue experienced globally—the invisibility of marginalised communities and peripheral informal settlements. In this Barcelona-based case, the MUHBA made a poignant statement about how museums can step in and contribute to fostering inclusivity in urban historical narratives by organising exhibitions as vehicles for community voices and narratives that would otherwise be erased or forgotten from contemporary urban memory. In the present edited volume, Emilie Sitzia's chapter *Exhibiting Conflict as a Transformative Strategy* engages with similar issues, providing a vivid example of the role that museums can play in making otherwise hidden (even traumatic) local stories visible, and thus opening spaces for dialogue, understanding, and eventually transformation of social selves and social relationships.

In the same special issue of *Museum International* (2018), Mouliou's article reports on a project with refugee teenagers in Greece, a participatory, engaged process in which young people in the refugee camp were invited to discover the culture of Athens while expressing and reflecting on their own (Mouliou 2018). The work process described by Mouliou involved the creation of a safe space for discovery and self-expression by the young refugees. It resulted in the design and development of an exhibition in a pop-up museum in the camp, themed on *Discovery*. The design process and its outcomes were underpinned by a joint statement that read:

“A museum is a space of wonder, hope, creativity and discovery. This little museum corner is about us, our discoveries and hopes” (Mouliou 2018, p. 128). These themes are reflected as well in this volume by Julian McDougall’s chapter on *Third Space Literacies and Museum Learning*, which explores the curatorial and engagement strategies employed by the London-based Museum of Homelessness to advance its social justice agenda and support the homeless community by including in its exhibiting practices ‘object stories’—live performances coming from people with a direct experience of homelessness.

The examples above illustrate situated museum interventions that help us envision what might be some of the key reasons for museums engaging with change, a possible response to the question in the title of this section. Why (should museums aim to offer) transformative museum experiences? Quite simply, as stated by Lynch (2017—see also Altayli and Viau-Courville 2018a), because of the role they have been entrusted with, as socio-cultural institutions with a mandate to collect, store, curate, interpret, communicate and preserve culture and memory. For many museums, active engagement with issues of social justice and social change aligns naturally with their policies and missions, it is a foundational goal.

There is a thin boundary in these practices and the narratives that surround them, between mediation and activism. Or, should we say rather, an underlying dynamic alternating between speech and action, between ground for (re)interpretation/voice and grounds for interventions that seek changing the status-quo. As the editors Altayli and Viau-Courville argue about how museums might engage with contested histories in their special issue, museums might “address topics that divide public opinion as well as the ways in which they empower their communities to take a stand and make sure their voices are heard” (2018b, n.p.). On the one hand, we can see these museum actions as expressions of their knowledge dissemination and educational agendas, fulfilled by surfacing erased or forgotten histories and by offering new, sometimes unexpected and unconventional interpretations. A different dynamic plays out when museums act on a defined agenda for change that may take forms such as empowering previously marginalised communities to have a voice and create platforms for exercising that voice, or seeking to redress unequal stakes in the curation and communication of history in multicultural societies. The transformational potential of such practices is evident not only for the communities engaged, such as refugees in the host countries, or marginalised populations in the outskirts of metropolises such as Barcelona, as reported above. But also, if we take an ecological perspective (Vermeeren et al. 2018b; Sabiescu and Charatzopoulou 2018) as endorsed in this book, these actions unavoidably contribute to changing the balance of power, representation and visibility in societies. Oftentimes it might be a small ripple, nevertheless, its echoes might still go beyond the museum’s exhibiting spaces and even the local boundaries, as illustrated for instance in Albert’s article (2018), where MUHBA’s exhibition about a shanty town inspired further projects and citizen initiatives on the same topic.

Discussions on museum impacts and social change have lately been framed in ways that put forth this active agenda of change in unambiguous terms by speaking about “the activist museum” (Bergevin 2018) or “the disobedient museum” (Message

2018). For Bergevin, the term frames museum impacts in a way that values visitors' own understandings and sees them as the active makers rather than the passive recipients of experiences staged for them: "an activist museum practice refers to an approach to museum work which advocates for positive socio-political change including the advancement of civil and human rights" (2018, p. ii). Similar to the stance endorsed in this book, transformative experiences are the cornerstone of activist museum practices, which Bergevin sees embedded in narratives of transformation that surround the visiting experience (an argument that we will come back to later in this introductory chapter).

1.2 What Do We Mean by "Transformative Museum Experiences"?

While in the previous section we have examined why museums might engage with social and visitor change and transformation, we now seek to bring clarity to the notion of *transformative museum experiences* and attempt to better outline the porous boundaries between these and other types of experiences that museums have traditionally offered and continue to offer. Traditionally, museums are used to researching, anticipating and leveraging visitors' background, beliefs and goals to promote meaningful experiences and learning (Garner et al. 2016). As we have argued above and as stated in the newest ICOM definition of museums, the value of museum experiences is associated with the potential to affect the visitor in some ways, and therefore to result in some type of change or transformation. This may take very different forms, from enhanced understanding and retention of cultural content in an educational experience, to potential for immersion and cutting off the visitor from the ordinary vibes of the everyday world, for an exhibition visitor. If museums have been offering *meaningful* experiences all along, what does it mean for a museum to cater for *transformative* experiences?

To elucidate this, the notion of "transformative experience" can be approached from several angles, framed by scholarship associated with different disciplines and research areas, from sociology to leisure studies. Before we unpack some of these, it is worth clarifying that we have in mind experiences that are designed and offered or staged with a clear purpose or intention. Duerden and colleagues (2015) argue that this sets apart designed or structured experiences from other spontaneous ones, as the nature of the experience and the outcomes for the visitor all occur within "provider manipulated frameworks", with examples ranging from the experience of dining in a restaurant to attending a concert or an exhibition (p. 603). We also use "transformative" and "transformational" experiences as synonyms.

An extremely well outlined, systematic theorisation of transformative experiences comes from leisure studies, in the work of Duerden et al. (2018) who outline a framework for designing "structured experiences", focussing on extraordinary types of experiences, those not typically experienced in everyday life. Duerden and

colleagues distinguish between three types of extraordinary experiences: memorable, meaningful and transformational. The distinction between these is given by the degree of intensity of three possible subjective reactions that are quintessential for extraordinary experiences: emotion, discovery, and change (p. 202). Thus, memorable experiences are those where the subjective reaction to the experience is strong emotion; in meaningful ones the subjective reaction involves “strong emotions and the discovery of significant and personally relevant insights” (p. 206); while transformational experiences trigger all three reactions, being defined by the authors as:

An experience where the objective elements engage an individual’s attention and produce subjective reactions involving strong emotions, the discovery of significant and personally relevant insights, and personal changes in values, beliefs, intentions, or self-perceptions. Most often transformative experiences are characterized by intrinsically motivated, enduring changes in self-perception and behavior. (Duerden et al. 2018, p. 208)

The importance of emotional engagement is evident in Duerden’s definition of transformative experiences, as is the fact that it is “personal”, it is a reaction subjectively experienced by the person to whom the staged experience has been targeted. These are qualities mentioned as well in the still emerging literature on museums and change specifically focussed on transformative experiences (e.g., Bergevin 2018; Garner et al. 2016) and a larger body of literature on museums, emotional engagement and empathy (e.g., Gokcigdem 2016; Simon 2014; Wildt 2018), some of which hint at the transformative potential of empathetic and/or emotionally charged experiences. The edited volume on *Fostering empathy in museums* (Gokcigdem 2016) makes a direct connection between the degree of emotional and empathetic engagement and transformative experiences. In her 2018 article on museums and empathy, Dutch museum professional Annemarie de Wildt provides a few poignant examples of museum exhibitions that sought to employ empathy as an engagement device, to tell often difficult stories of conflict, trauma and violence. An example is the *Museum of Broken Relationships*, which narrates the experiences of the Balkan wars from the perspective of the people affected by the conflicts. Narrative and storytelling are central to de Wildt’s analysis of empathetic museum spaces and experiences. For de Wildt, exhibiting personal stories is a means to create connectedness to visitors’ personal emotions and thus trigger a sense of empathy, especially when these stories ask people to endorse a point of view embedded in a “performative space” (p. 81). Adopting somebody else’s point of view is a powerful device for affording experiential engagements with difficult issues, from conflict and collective trauma to sex work and stigma. We find similar ideas in the work of Bergevin (2018), who looks at how storytelling and narrative contribute to creating “affective connectedness”—ways of engaging in the museum space characterised by intense emotion and empathy (2019). For Bergevin, affective connectedness is the cornerstone of transformation in the museum space.

Besides emotion, Duerden et al.’s definition (2018) emphasises two other aspects of *transformative museum experiences*—discovery and change. One of the best articulated frameworks on (designed) transformative experiences that captures these two

dimensions comes from the work of Gaggioli (2016). While we will come back to Gaggioli's design framework in the next section, here we report on the theory around transformative museum experiences that underpins his design approach. These are, for Gaggioli, "self-actualization experiences" (2016, p. 97) that bear three characteristics: First, change is experienced as a sudden and intense rupture from previously held beliefs, ideas and even identity. Just like in other scholarly definitions of extraordinary experiences, these experiences are sudden and intense (Duerden et al. 2018), and "potentially life altering in that they may contribute to personal growth or renewal" (Jefferies and Lepp 2012, p. 38). Second, for Gaggioli, the change affects not only the contents of an individual's inventory (beliefs, ideas, values) but also their worldview, the experience of being oneself and engaging with the world. Thus, transformation is not merely small-scale change, it involves "epistemic expansion". Third, Gaggioli draws on dynamic systems theory to look at the mechanisms of change. A systems perspective enables the identification of multiple triggers and trajectories of change that culminate in the moment when the transformation is being experienced as a sudden event. Thus, even if perceived as instantaneous, the transformation is emergent, the result of complex mechanisms of self-organisation and multi-scaled changes that culminate in that critical moment of transformation as acknowledged by the agent.

Another analytical angle worth exploring regards the dynamics between the individual and the collective when analysing transformative museum experiences. Several recent works on museums and change take a collective stance, they focus on issues experienced collectively by social groups, communities or urban collectives and speak of outcomes such as community empowerment and collective agency (Altayli and Viau-Courville 2018a). Personal experiences are inherent in collective discourses and practices, as after all collective experiences can always be analysed from the angle of the individual person and the way their impact was subjectively felt. However, the analytical lens focussed on the individual tends to be rather associated with mechanisms and outcomes that emphasise emotion and empathy experienced personally, subjectively as outlined above and in the work of Bergevin (2018), de Wildt (2018) and the edited volume by Gokcigdem (2016). To make sense of transformative experiences for groups and collectives, other lenses on transformative experiences are useful, which put emphasis on relationships, connectedness and sense of community. One such theory comes from the work of performance studies scholar Victor Turner and his theory of anti-structure (2008). Turner characterises experiences that break the routine of everyday life and enable people to experience a sense of community, what he calls "communitas". These experiences are facilitated by special rituals and shared purposes that free participants of their everyday constraints and identities and open up novel ways of perceiving, activating their potential and connectedness to the others. These are highly unique, evanescent events that generate what sociologist Émile Durkheim calls "collective effervescence" (Durkheim 1912/1995). The focus in both Durkheim's and Turner's work is on the break-out nature of the experience and its being collective, shared, generating a sense of communion and solidarity that may also be felt as renewing and transformational for the self.

To adequately position the role of museums and their engagement with important social issues seeking transformation at individual and collective levels, it is useful to broaden the perspective to a systemic one, which locates the museum in ecosystems of social, cultural, economic and educational actors (Vermeeren et al. 2018b; Sabiescu and Charatzopoulou 2018). As Bergevin (2018) argues, to understand and appreciate the museum visit as transformative practice, we have to contextualise the museum experience within constellations of personal experiences that together may shift attitudes, assumptions, perspectives and even behaviour in visitors.

1.3 How Can We Design Transformative Experiences in Museums?

How can we design museum activities and exhibits that lead to transformative experiences, given the fact that the outcomes of transformative experiences are inherently subjective and therefore not predictable (e.g., Gaggioli 2016)?

In his focus on museum digital transformation, Mason (2022) proposes to adopt a design thinking approach, which he sees as a human-centred design practice. According to Mason (2022), design thinking approaches have four main principles in common: they are (1) people-centred, starting by gaining an understanding of people's needs, behaviours, and motivations by employing empathic, ethnographic methods; (2) problem-framing instead of problem-solving, re-framing the problem in human-centric ways; (3) highly collaborative, co-creative and visual processes involving members of interdisciplinary teams, as well as visitors and communities; (4) highly iterative creative processes based on a set of different prototype methods (to "make and experiment" and test towards the final design solution).

Gaggioli (2016) suggests that we should think in terms of designing transformational affordances, which, he argues, can be defined as theoretically-based design guidelines for inviting, eliciting or facilitating a transformative experience. He illustrates this by discussing four interrelated aspects of transformative experience design: (i) transformative medium, e.g., plays, storytelling, imagery, music, films and paintings; (ii) transformative content, referring to the content or subject and structure of an experience, which include epistemic and emotional affordances; (iii) transformative form, which concerns the style rather than the subject of the experience that is represented; (iv) transformative purpose, for which he suggests to think in terms of transformative processes rather than in terms of the transformative outcome and to consider interactive experiences as spaces for transformative possibilities.

The notion of liminal spaces is often brought up in this context. Liedgren et al. (2023) state that "In liminality, we know that what we see is not our existing world, yet we experience an immediate feeling of something very real" and that "Designing liminal spaces also means helping people to explore new 'spaces of the self'" (p. 2). Based on four assumptions about the nature of liminal spaces, Liedgren et al. (2023)

propose a conceptual framework and a three-step approach for developing technology that delivers transcendence and deeper experiences. According to the authors, “Putting on hold some beliefs from our existing narrative and entering a liminal space allows us to safely test, play with and consider alternative narratives” (Liedgren et al. 2023, p. 2).

The three-step process identified by Liedgren and colleagues (2023), referenced as well in the present volume (Chap. 2: *Juxtaposition and the Liminal Exhibit*) is in line with various phases that can be identified in models of transformative learning processes (e.g., Mezirow 1978; Nohl 2015). Such models generally start with some event that catalyses in the agent a need or desire for transformation, which is later followed by a process of gaining deeper understandings, experimental and undirected inquiry, exploring new attitudes and behaviour, until finally the new attitudes or behaviour become an integral part of one’s life. Bergevin’s study (2018) on roles that museums can play in visitors’ narratives of transformation, suggests that museums can engage in various phases of a person’s transformative process: either in a single phase, or in multiple phases. For example, a museum may “raise awareness” or “remind us” of a specific issue and thus instil in people a desire for transformation, it may help people “foster a deeper understanding” on a certain topic, or “may inspire action” (Bergevin 2018) by providing a liminal space in which visitors can explore new practices.

Any element of a museum’s collection may potentially be used to build a transformative experience around it. Chisolm et al. (2020), for example, provide illustrative cases of how exhibits in an art museum were used for transformative learning of clinically-relevant skills in healthcare. Soren (2009) provides ten triggers for transformation in museums, and explains how a museum’s collection contributed to the transformative experiences. For example, in the Canadian War museum the permanent collection is exhibited in spaces that “evoke the atmosphere of war, physically situate visitors in the trenches and battle grounds, and overwhelm” (Soren 2009, p. 236). In another example featuring an artwork by a former resident of a First Nations residential school, the resident’s images “showed how devastating and monstrous his life was” (p. 237). Messages in the comment book by visitors who had personal experience with residential schools helped a visitor “understand how she deals with suffering and painful moments in history” (Soren 2009, p. 237). Another person at the Hagia Sophia museum in Istanbul, felt “completely immersed in the history because of the reality of the building, and the authenticity of the objects and the mosaics”. For her, the experience “was a culmination of everything she had learned and seen related to this masterpiece of Byzantine architecture” (p. 236). As these examples illustrate, any collection item may be used for creating a transformative museum experience, if creatively and collaboratively designed from a human-centred perspective (see Mason 2022). Such a human-centred perspective is employed in Chronis’s framework of narrative construction (2012) to understand lived experiences. This framework consists of three successive stages of *narrative enrichment*, *narrative imagining*, and *narrative closure* to understand how visitors make sense of the exhibition. The framework is anchored in the visitors’ point of view, following them as they interpret the exhibition elements according to their own

frame of reference which consists of their pre-existing knowledge of the topic, their previous lived experiences, and their own life story.

Similarly, the range of technologies that can be applied to enrich museum experiences seems endless. Based on interviews with museum experience designers, Calvi and Vermeeren (2023) provide an overview of various digital technologies (ranging from apps and simple sensors to robots, Artificial Intelligence and Virtual Reality) and how they may be applied to enrich museum experiences (e.g., for extending the visitor journey, increased engagement, immersion, social experiences, personalisation, etc.). However, their focus is on museum experiences in general, rather than on *transformative* museum experiences. Gaggioli (2016), not specifically focussing on museum experiences, argues that immersive virtual reality holds the highest potential to foster a transformative process. However, as was consistently stated by the museum experience designers interviewed by Calvi and Vermeeren (2023), “technology is not the first element to think of when designing an experience”, “technology is not seen as leading, but the museum’s values and stories are” (p. 8). Calvi and Vermeeren (2023) also found that nowadays “many design agencies explicitly think about museum visits in terms of journeys or as an experience that is integrated into a bigger (or more holistic) experience in time and place” (p. 11). Extending the visitor journey or seeing it as integrated into a bigger experience in time, is especially important for transformative experiences. Novel technologies provide new opportunities to achieve this, and through that help bridge the gap from experiences in the museum to the transformative steps in people’s everyday lives. However, the questions around the optimal length and nature of a transformative visitor journey and how it can be embedded or related to a person’s broader transformational journey still deserve further exploration.

In conclusion: Designed museum experiences indeed have the potential to play an important role in people’s transformative (learning) experiences in relation to societal challenges. But there are still many design challenges in how to effectively do so, as well as in how technology may support this.

1.4 Who Should We Design Such Experiences for? A Special Focus on Communities

While the transformative experiences mentioned above are addressed to museum audiences *tout court*, a special kind of audience is made up of the communities that are part of the museum ecosystem, which deserve separate attention. As briefly anticipated in the section on the different dynamics between individual and social in the design of transformative experiences, when it comes to communities, the transformative role of museum experiences might be understood and defined in a different way.

With the advent of the New Museology (Morse and Munro 2018), the focus of museum practice has gradually shifted from museum professionals defending their

“silos of expertise” onto seeking alliances across disciplines and audiences. As a consequence, the people-centred, much less collection-driven approach to museum practice advocated by the New Museology has put a stronger focus on communities and on their engagement in heritage discourse. It has given them a voice in claiming their own narrative in the otherwise traditional view on heritage and discourse perpetrated by museums as institutions.

It is however with the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, that participatory approaches to cultural heritage have become mainstream in heritage practice. It is its Article 15 in particular that emphasises the need to promote the active engagement of communities “to create, maintain and transmit such heritage, and to involve them actively in management” (Sousa 2018, p. 10). In museums, participation has become a recognised and accepted concept and a practice that is more and more adopted since Nina Simon’s seminal book on the participatory museum (2010).

But what does participation have to do with the transformative role of museum experiences? In the academic literature, the attention to community engagement has taken different perspectives: some scholars (see for example Burgers 2021) are interested in lowering the threshold to heritage access and for this reason have been looking into how communities can be involved in its management. Others, like Chmutina et al. (2021) extend community involvement beyond mere management, onto planning and preserving local cultural heritage. Houpert (2019), on the other hand, stresses the importance of engaging the local community even earlier in this process, in determining what heritage is for them and also in identifying which forms this engagement may take. Beyond their intrinsic differences, all these perspectives assume that local communities need to develop a sense of ownership for their heritage. With ownership comes a sense of pride for it, as well as a sense of awareness of the value it represents, leading to a feeling of responsibility for it.

In this sense, the participation of communities in the museum discourse can be considered as transformative to them because it places them right at the centre of museum practice. This new role may become a catalyst for transformation because it contributes to empowering and making them valuable peers for the museum as an institution (Simon 2010). Participatory practices thus represent a way to “connect people, places and collections, and create public value” (McCall and Gray 2014, p. 4). Applying the concept of transformative experiences to participatory museum practices with communities captures nuanced dimensions of change, often-times different from the ones typically afforded by museum visits. These changes might not necessarily take place inside the museum spaces, though they may be initiated or punctuated by museum interventions. They also have different temporalities and rhythms of change, often involving long-term collaborations between museums and local communities. These changes and the scales at which they might be experienced vary greatly according to the type of community involved and its needs, the types of collaboration and the heritage or culture-related issues at stake. In other words, they are not prone to generalisation and even what may be considered “best approaches” in engaging communities to make them feel heard and to democratise access to heritage, are local in nature, context-specific and not easily transferable to

other contexts. While the UNESCO Convention lists a number of methods to involve communities, some scholars (Burgers 2021; Rodenberg et al. 2023) still contend that “there is much debate, but little research, on current concepts, tools and procedures for democratisation in the access to and definition, appropriation, management and planning of heritage” (Burgers 2021, p. 71). In this introductory chapter, we merely wish to raise awareness of the important transformative potential that community engagement in museums practices has for communities (and oftentimes for museums as well). While the literature offers valuable case studies on how such transformative experiences might unfold, their valences, challenges and their contradictions, there are critical questions being opened up as well. Some questions, with direct concern for this volume, regard the role that technology might play to facilitate this involvement. In a world where digital technologies are pervasive in the lives of museum visitors and increasingly integrated in curatorial and educational practices, how can they be leveraged for creating platforms for communities to come together, negotiate collective views, develop and convey their own discourses and interpretations around heritage? How can museums become “a shared space with communities” (Mason 2022, p. 2)? How can this involvement be sustainable? And ultimately, how can approaches to more elaborate, often long-term community engagement be conflated with or leveraged by the design of transformative experiences *in situ*?

1.5 For What? The Significance and Consequences of (Designing for) Transformative Experiences in Museums

The question of impact is inherent in the design of transformative experiences, yet as argued above, it is also most elusive, as the outcomes are subjective and difficult to articulate. In this section, we would like to open up for debate the very idea of impact and how we might appreciate or assess it, when considering transformative experiences.

In a circular fashion, we would firstly like to bring back into focus the argument on the changing roles of museums in society which opened this introductory chapter. In order to fully appreciate the value of the transformative experiences offered by museums, it is necessary to raise awareness of the different scales at which we might locate change: At micro-scale, we regard the experience itself as a medium for change. At this scale, the impacts are as well anchored in the context and participants that partake in the experience. In close connection to this, at macro-scale, incremental changes have been contributing for years to shifting museums’ roles and identities as sociocultural actors. These shifts affect not only museums and their internal structures, but also relationships with other social actors and complex dynamics of cooperation among them. Acknowledging these shifts at macro-scale is important, in our view, for being able to grasp the underpinnings of transformative experiences at the micro-scale. In other words, we need to keep in mind the way museums function

in society, how they collaborate with other institutions and how they come to be perceived by citizens, because all of these shape the context within which we can appreciate at face value the impacts of museum experiences on visitors and more broadly their overall societal value (Scott 2009).

To illustrate this, we would like to highlight here one vector of change at the macro-scale, regarding the educational role of museums. While education has traditionally been a core function of the museum, nowadays museums are becoming increasingly important education players as third spaces (Potter and McDougall 2017), where interest-based activities, mediated interactions and porous teacher-student boundaries come together to shape more vibrant, alternative teaching and learning practices. The concept of “experience” is fundamental for the educational role of museums. As Scott (2006, 2009) argued in her well-researched review of museums societal values and impacts, the value of museum education resides in the “unique type of learning experience” (2006, p. 56) it offers, which sets it apart from formal scholarly institutions and underscores its central contribution to out of school education. The growing interest in museum learning reflects broader trends and associated discourses about changing education paradigms, employability, and the future of work. In a world marked by fast change, traditional educational actors are slower to adapt their curricula and learning approaches to meet change and move at equal speed to follow its evolution so that they can train new generations of learners equipped to navigate shifting job market realities. Where schools are slow to move and adapt, the learning experiences that museums offer become valuable, not as replacement, but rather as ways to calm the gap, to fill needs for inspiration, exposure to novelty or to new interpretations. In short, museums can kindle interest in transformative learning (Kitchenham 2008) pathways, or offer spaces for transformative learning episodes that can be followed upon and deepened by learners by accessing other actors, institutions and spaces in the learning ecosystem. For example, a digital crafts workshop in a museum will not prepare a future professional, but might offer a just enough blend of know-how and experience to inspire participants that are interested in this field to assess opportunities against aspirations and gently suggest directions for further training (Sabiescu and Zajzon 2023). This example illustrates how trends shaping learning ecosystems at the macro-scale are brought to bear on the design of micro-scale learning experiences.

In our view, when we seek to appreciate the impacts of situated learning experiences in museums we have to be mindful of how the experience is positioned both at micro and at macro-scale. Acknowledging this complexity, in this volume we endorse an ecosystem approach (Vermeeren et al. 2018a; Sabiescu and Charatzopoulou 2018), seeing museums in networked ecologies of learning spaces, actors and offerings where they perform a unique role, but also where they depend on collaborations with other actors in order to fulfil their educational mission. This perspective is adopted as a means to properly contextualise and calibrate the approaches shaping the design of museum learning experiences, with consideration towards relationships established with broader societal norms, values, practices, spaces and discourses for (out of school) education and learning.

While we focussed above on learning experiences in relation to the educational function of museums, other facets of museum roles and functions can be explored, where the links between micro- and macro-scales appear important for a thorough consideration of impacts. We could, for instance, extend the discussion above on community participation in museum practices, bringing to bear the same dynamic between the micro and the macro-scale. In all these cases, museums can be seen as responsive institutions, stepping in, often as pioneers, to fill the needs of a society pressed by rapid change. In conclusion, an ecosystemic lens enables us to capture and appreciate more thoroughly the scales, mechanisms and trajectories of transformation and change. And an assessment lens that favours more attention to processual, step by step, and multi-scaled change is prone to give us a more comprehensible view of impacts. As suggested as well by Bergevin (2018), this approach would be less concerned with final outcomes and more with on-going processes—appreciating impacts in terms of active engagement of visitors and communities with museums, honouring their perspectives and positionalities.

1.6 The Chapters in This Book

The book is divided in three parts, offering complementary perspectives around transformative museums experiences that reflect the ecosystemic perspective underpinning the thinking and approach to practice that informs this volume: after unpacking the concept of “transformative experience” in relation to museums and museum visitors and associated design approaches in Part I, the chapters in Part II then look at how transformative experiences are emblematic of museums themselves being subjected to change, both within their organisational structures as well as in the way they interpret and act to fulfil their social roles and mandates, and the relationships established with other socio-cultural, economic and political actors and institutions. The final part discusses the role that technologies play in supporting the delivery of transformative experiences, along with their sociocultural and ethical implications.

1.6.1 *Part I: Transformative Experiences: Concept and Design Approaches*

In Chap. 2, Johan Liedgren, Andrea Gaggioli and Pieter M. A. Desmet sketch an interpretive frame for theorising transformative museum experiences at the junction of the familiar and the unfamiliar, of what is and what could potentially be. This in-between space of liminality is an extension of what museums are already: sites of experience separate from the everyday, by their definition realms where extraordinary experiences (Duerden et al. 2018) are set to be staged. Therefore, the potential for transformative experiences is already embedded in the foundation of museums as

liminal spaces. Yet, materialising the transformative potential of such experiences requires an intentional design that, to start with, disengages the visitor from their ordinary, everyday experience flow and patterns of thinking. This space is suspended in between the real and tangible on the one hand, and the imaginative and metaphoric on the other. Liedgren et al. argue that this is an *active* space in the sense that for the transformative experience to emerge, the visitor needs to be immersed enough in order to allow their ordinary flow of thinking and feeling to be disrupted, but still maintain their capacity to make sense of the experience in ways that afford transformation of the self-convictions and beliefs, attitudes and worldviews.

The authors' *Liminal Design Framework* distinguishes three steps for activating this in-between space and engaging the visitors: a Narrative Desire that strikes a balance between being at the same time relevant and unexpected (Step 1), is materialised, instantiated for the visitor as a space of Optimised Abstraction (Step 2). Suspension of Disbelief (Step 3) ensures the continuity of the experience and the ability of the visitor to engage fully and immersively within it. Thus, the visitor is then able to step back at the end and bring its echoes and ramifications back into the ruptured, disrupted flow of the everyday, where the experience will ultimately leave a trace, a seed of transformation. The chapter offers a tapestry of cases in which this three-step model is illustrated by exhibition concepts, museum galleries, or specific hotspots in exhibition trails.

Chapter 3, *Attachments in Museum Experience Design*, by Noémi Zajzon, links conceptually the notion of 'transformative experience' to that of 'attachment', a connection which is hinted at in the subtitle *Displaying relationships and networks of public urban heritage*. The chapter narrative unfolds from an ecosystemic, relational perspective that highlights the role of public attachments in connecting visitors with the subtle messages weaved in the exhibition design, generating engaging experiences that leverage public memories. This connection is explored by examining the design of an historical exhibition that celebrated the figure of a city mayor who left an enduring legacy in Târgu Mureş, a city in Transylvania. The chapter offers a rich theoretical exploration informed by affect theories, symbolic interactionism and science and technology studies, showing how exhibition and experience designers can use public attachments to create engaging, potentially transformative experiences through historical exhibitions, linking fragments of public memory to issues of contemporary relevance.

In *Designing "One Minute" experiences* (Chap. 4) Anders Sundnes Løvlie, Linda Stoltze and Timothy Wray address an interesting research and design question: how to design engaging, stimulating and potentially transformative experiences for visitors, while being aware of their short attention span in engaging with exhibits? The chapter details the design and user testing of *One Minute*, an app that can be used to generate informative content about museum exhibits in a format that is stimulating and interactive. This case opens up valuable points for reflection and discussion around the value of "one minute experiences": as the authors enquire, even though several studies did prove the short attention span of museum visitors while in the galleries, how valuable can a one-minute engagement be? The chapter addresses this question and proposes reflections informed by the literature and the data from the

One Minute study, concluding with an important realisation: that any transformative experience starts with catching and then holding the attention. Thus, short experiences that are engaging, while not transformative in themselves, might set in motion processes of (slow, but real) transformation. One of these may be the creation of a long-term relationship between museums and their visitors, positioning the museum as a friendly, engaging go-to place to enjoy art, learn and reflect.

1.6.2 Part II: The Changing Museum: Structure, Social Role and Relationships

Part II opens with a chapter that looks at the transformative potential of experiences offered by science museums and centres, as well as the major changes undergone by these institutions throughout the past century and since the turn of the century in particular (Chap. 5). Marjoleine G. van der Meij and Christianne J. Blijleven locate the vortex of change around science museums and science centres in the evolution of science communication paradigms, which shifted the communication of science towards more participatory and dialogic models. The chapter offers an outline of the historical evolution of experiences offered by science museums and science centres, showing how along with the integration of more dialogic and participatory approaches, their design started to be more and more considerate of societal issues and actively engaging with them. The chapter offers rich illustrations of recent and contemporary exhibitions that illustrate both the transformation of science museums and centres, as well as their transformative potential when it comes to taking effect on visitors' knowledge, worldviews and attitudes. These are accompanied by reflections on the mindshift needed to fully embrace the dialogic and participatory models that the museums started to be open towards throughout the past decades.

In Chap. 6, *Discovering Volunteers as an Essential Community of Practice in Small Museums in the Netherlands*, Silvia Naldini and Nicholas Clarke highlight the human dimension in the context of change around museums. The chapter reports on a project that involved seven small museums in the Netherlands and tested a method for involving volunteers in ideating and proposing strategies for assessing museum performance and formulating new directions and strategies for museum transformation. The chapter brings a valuable contribution by drawing attention to the context and challenges surrounding small museums, how these are sustained by an often invisible, nonetheless essential, community of volunteers, and how the role of the latter can be leveraged through specific engagement techniques. The workshop-based method outlined by the authors invites volunteers to reflect on the current strategy and activities of the museum and sketch a vision for desired future directions of change, spanning internal museum operations and the relationships established with visitors and surrounding communities.

In Chap. 7, *Third Space Literacies and Museum Learning*, Julian McDougall discusses the transformative dimension of the role that museums have for long filled,

that of acting as spaces for non-formal learning. McDougall uses as a central case the newly opened Museum of Homelessness in London, and by comparing it with experiences staged in four other museums, unfolds a poignant argument about the way transformation is embedded in the social and educational function of the museum. Museums, McDougall argues, can reasonably be said to intend a “dynamic pedagogy” where change is embedded, but the extent to which they can deliver on this will depend on the articulation of curatorial and experience design practices. The Museum of Homelessness makes an excellent case for this argument. After waiting for years to find a physical building, the exhibition narrative has been designed to evoke the experience of homelessness while constantly inviting the visitor to make connections to first space (visitors’ own) experiences that are inherently human, personal, and thus engulfing: the need for refuge in difficult times, the need and comfort of finding community, solidarity and eventually the vital necessity to cherish hope and envision (shared and personal) futures. Thus, the museum offers a space for “transformative relations” by leveraging and activating connections to personal histories, something which can be discussed with reflection to the notion of “attachments” discussed earlier in Noémi Zajzon’s chapter, only that in here, the focus is on the personal, whereas Zajzon explored the public nature of attachments in relation to history making and historical exhibitions. Ultimately, McDougall’s chapter argues that the crux of the transformative potential of museum experiences lies in the intentionality to create a third space of reflexive encounter between what is being exhibited and the visitor’s first space, delivered by weaving powerful narratives and themes around the exhibits on display.

The transformative potential of historical exhibitions, addressed by Noémi Zajzon in Part I is explored once again, from a different perspective, by Emilie Sitzia’s chapter on *Exhibiting Conflict as a Transformative Strategy* (Chap. 8). Sitzia argues that one direction for transformative exhibitory practices may lie in the possibility to exhibit multiple, even conflicting narratives in the same space. The chapter takes the case of Musée d’Histoire de Marseille (MHM), which has been asked by local citizens to include in its exhibition a narration of the clashes between the citizens and the municipality of Marseille with respect to buildings safety, following a notorious case of building collapse. This case is used by Sitzia, weaved into a rich theoretical discussion that ultimately argues for disruption, conflict as a root node and first step in transformational journeys. Rather than discarding conflict, the chapter invites reflection on how museums can leverage their social and educational role to welcome in their spaces polyvocality, multiplicity of views, even when they conflict, as a way to generate reflexivity and, paradoxically, new pathways to dialogue and understanding.

In Chap. 9, *Ochre Painting Workshops as a Tool for Interactive and Sensory Museum Learning*, Tammy Hodskiss offers a highly original reflection on the engaging and potentially transformative nature of sensorial workshops where visitors are invited to engage hands-on with and learn about ochre rock, painting and art. The ochre workshops are offered by the Origins Centre in South Africa and reflect the museum’s approach to learning as an experiential, hands-on, interactive process. Visitors can touch, grind, process, and paint with ochre, as means to learn about its

use in cosmetics, medicinal uses, indigenous arts as well as contemporary artistic expressions.

1.6.3 Part III: Supporting Technologies

In Chap. 10, Lora Markova focuses on the documentation and preservation of immersive museum experiences generated via eXtended Reality (XR) technologies such as AR and VR. The chapter starts by exploring the sociocultural value and potentially transformative role of immersive experiences as a rationale for their preservation, drawing on two recent London-based cases of immersive experiences—*Virtual Veronese* (2019, The National Gallery) and *Curious Alice: The VR Experience* (2021, Victoria and Albert Museum). This enquiry is extended into a reflection on how the nature of immersive experiences and the very challenges brought by their preservation call for changes in museum practices and the relationships and collaborations nurtured with other sociocultural and technological organisations. For example, the process of preserving the VR experience offered by *Curious Alice: The VR Experience* would likely have to be sustained by collaborations between the V&A museum's team, including curators, designers and producers, creative technology companies as well as the targeted user communities.

In Chap. 11, *The Phyigital Museum Ecosystem*, Alessandra Miano focuses on phyigital experiences—museum experiences that leverage and integrate the affordances of digital technology and those of the museum or gallery space to create engaging, potentially engulfing experiences for visitors. Through a review of the literature and a suite of relevant case studies from Dutch museums, Miano defines a taxonomy of phyigital museum experiences according to the dynamics between the type of technology used and its integration in the physical space, the use of storytelling and the approach to visitor engagement. The analysis of the cases reveals the transformative potential associated with phyigital experiences, stemming from their capacity for immersivity and meaningful interaction. The question of agency appears to be central to this potential. It is by offering visitors the possibility to allow (or stimulate) the installation narrative to unfold, that these experiences are made unique through each episode of interaction, triggering different narrative threads and evoking subjective meanings and understandings.

The two final chapters approach, from different analytical angles, the question of Artificial Intelligence as a mediator of potentially transformative experiences, along with the ethical implications that museums should tackle while considering this potential. In Chap. 12, *Seeing Art Through the Eye of the Algorithm: Artificial Intelligence in the Museum*—Anders Sundnes Løvlie, Louie Søs Meyer, Christian Sivertsen, Peter Kun, Matthias Freiburger and Sebastian Risi weave the chapter narrative around a meaningful question: how does AI affect experiencing art in the museum? The chapter critically analyses different case examples of using AI to support, enhance, enrich, or even distort art experiences, showing how the potential of the technology is taken in very different directions in the world of art and

museums: the chapter starts by focussing on the use of AI (in particular computer vision) for analysing digital collections and creating new metadata, thus affording new ways of exploring or linking between collections items; followed by the analysis of generative AI in applications such as computer chatbots, voice assistants, game-play and image generation installations responsive to user input. The analysis then engages with projects that deliberately use AI to show the limitations of the trained algorithms and where it can go wrong, thus inviting reflections and more mature understandings beyond mere enthusiasm for the novelty of the technology. Based on the analysis of these cases, the authors offer an intellectually rich and inquisitive interpretation of the potential and the limitations of AI for shaping the experience of art.

Closing the section on supporting technologies and the book, Kathryn Brown's chapter *Artificial Exchange: Chatbots and the Ethics of Museum Experience Design* is a well documented and profoundly inquisitive essay that reviews and then questions the ascending trend of integrating AI technologies in museums to attract new audiences and uplift the visit experience. One of the arguments advanced in this chapter is that the integration of technologies such as AI in museums and the heritage domain is actually attempting to meet, through new means, ideals that have shaped and moved the New Museology and the participatory wave in museum experience design. Whether the integration and use of AI technologies respond or not to these ideals, is one of the core issues that demand urgent attention. Brown's sharp analysis of the underlying agendas, nuances and outcomes of AI uses in museums suggests that more often than not, these experimental spaces might be at odds with and even demand the reconsideration of established curatorial and educational principles and practices. Ultimately, Brown suggests that museums should question and problematise the types of experiences they seek to create with the help of AI, how these balance the ratio between the human and the technical, and what are the likely implications of integrating these new AI-supported experiences for the evolving sociocultural and educational roles of museums. If, for instance, the integration of AI seeks to attract to museums new audiences that would not otherwise participate in these spaces, what are the implications of these audiences preferring to engage with algorithmic speech rather than human to human conversation?

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