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ARCH 3700: A Seminar at Play

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Play and Museums: How does the lack of play in art museums adversely affect its educational value?

Museums are cultural institutions that house and showcase artifacts of cultural, historical, scientific, and artistic value. Museums include, but not limited to, several institutions such as science museums, natural observatories and zoos. Many of these institutions have a young target audience because schooling systems use them for educational activities. Therefore, museums incorporate elements of play through interactive elements to attract their visitors. While scientific museums have perfected the use of play in their exhibition spaces with interactive science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) installations which prompt learning through play, art museums lack elements of play for both visitors and artists. Art museums' decision to follow the path of traditional, white cube design has negatively influenced their potential educational influence.

Traditional vs. Non-Traditional Learning Spaces

Traditional learning spaces, such as classrooms, are seen as spaces with limited freedom; removing students from these environments allows them to fully immerse themselves in learning. In the sake of this essay, traditional learning spaces consists of classroom teaching where the teacher lectures face-to-face to studentsⁱ. Students feel they have limited freedom in classrooms like these, making it difficult for them to express and fully immerse themselves in learning. Many classrooms consist of rectangular rooms filled with arrays of square desks (as seen in figure 1)ⁱⁱ. Classrooms design as such conveys the idea of



Figure 1. Traditional Class

“I talk or demonstrate; you listen or observe”ⁱⁱⁱ. By removing students from these traditional spaces, they can learn in the real world without limitations. In the article, “Bodies and Affect in Non-Traditional Learning Spaces,” authors Amy McPherson and Sue Saltmarsh write about an experiment on the effect of children outside of traditional learning spaces^{iv}. The study compared the design of traditional classrooms to that of newly constructed classrooms designed by teachers and students. The goal of the experiment was to qualitatively measure the lasting effect of redesigned classrooms on student’s educational experience. Overall, the authors found an increase in interest and retention of learning in students outside of traditional learning spaces. To the modern-day student, traditional learning spaces are seen as conforming and the destruction of the creative mind. A slight stray from the social norms of the classroom, such as talking and daydreaming, is seen as misbehaving or disengagement. On the other hand, nontraditional spaces encourage these behaviors. Allowing students to fully immerse themselves in a new environment “harness[es] the exactment of play, the co-operation of group learning, and the autonomous freedom of children’s creativity” (McPherson & Saltmarsh, 839). Removing students from classrooms and placing them in art museums allows for cultural awareness and expansion.

Learning Styles in Art Museums

Art museums are seen as a non-traditional learning space because visitors can learn about historical events through the observation of cultural and artistic artifacts. With the start of the contemporary art movement, art educators determined traditional art teachings were flawed. Before the contemporary art movement, educators centered their teaching around the collection; however, afterwards, researchers determined educators needed to shift their attention to how visitors learn in museums. Instead of educators solely teaching visitors about the collection, educators became interested in the ability of natural learning. According to the article, “Bridging the Theory-Practice Divide in Contemporary Art Museum Education,” studies conducted in the early 1990s relived 4 main ways in which people learn in art museums^v:

Constructivism consists of the connection visitors make between the artwork and their personal life experiences. Visitors are encouraged to explore the artwork by themselves and draw connections with the art. Although it is the most popular learning theory, educators have determined this method is only successful depending on the visitor being actively engaged in the learning process and making their own connections.

Fostering Aesthetic Development encourages visitors to critically think about the artworks with guided questions. This methodology is mainly used in guided tours with educators asking questions which provoke visitors to think critically about the artworks. Visitors become active learners by educators prompting them to think about multiple points of view.

The **Contextual Method of Learning** (CML) considers the visitors interaction with the physical museum, personal knowledge, and social interaction. Many museum visitors come to the museum with friends, family, or social groups. The method encourages conversation amongst museum visitors to create a continuous cycle of learning.

Lastly, the **Literacy Theory** is based on the visitor's ability to create a story with the artwork. Whether it is an official story or one based on personal experience, visitors can create stories to better connection with the artwork.

Art museums are seen as non-traditional learning spaces because they encourage natural learning in students unlike traditional learning space. In the classroom setting, teachers lecture while students are required to listen with little input. In art museums, students become an active participant in their learning experience by forming personal connections with the artworks. The most practiced learning theory is the combination of contextualism, and CML. Museums architecture is designed for visitors to explore the space with free choice for a self-designated time period. Buildings include multiple exhibition galleries, restaurants, café shoppes, and gift shops all interconnected in maze-like hallways. The possibility of free-range exploration encourages visitors to learn about the building along with the artwork. While learning styles in art museums encourage natural learning in non-traditional learning spaces, architectural shift in museums has negatively affected their educational influence.

Architectural Shift in Art Museums

In the early 18th century, the word museum did not have the same connotation as it does today. Royal families and elitists would collect art in their private homes which they would put on display for a select chosen. This original idea of displaying private collections was seen as *museum-pure institution*^{vi}. Collectors were not concerned with displaying the artworks

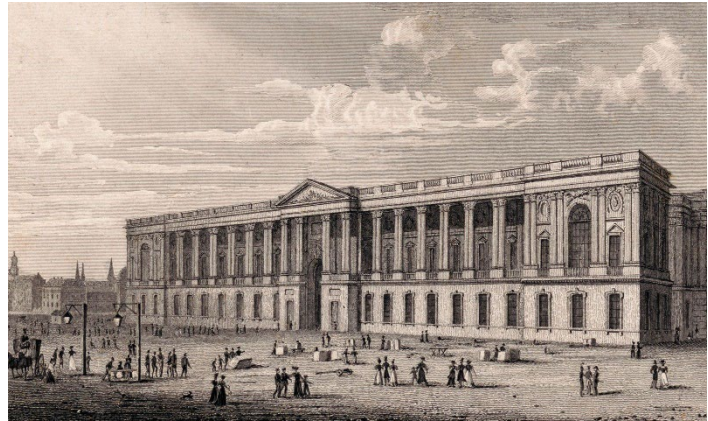


Figure 2. 19th century print of Eastern facade of the Louvre Museum, Paris.

based on historical context; instead, they focused more on creating an aesthetically pleasing space that combined the artwork and the space into one. The most famous example of a *museum-pure institution* is the Louvre in Paris, France (as seen in figure 2^{vii}). When the museum first opened in 1793, the Louvre housed thousands of artworks and artifacts looted from French colonies. The building, originally built in the 12th century, acted as a royal residence. In its beginning years, the museum was focused on showcasing art and the space with works being placed throughout the building. Although the museum has elements of a private collection, the increase in museum attendance has shifted the design away from *museum-pure institutions*.

As the attendance rate of museums increased, problems and concerns with displaying artwork began to arise. First was the argument of whether *pure-museum institutions* should be considered public or private spaces. Although these spaces were housed in private homes, it was seen as a public space for anybody to enter. Architects and designers especially were caught in the middle of the argument because people wanted to keep the aesthetic of a private home with closed off spaces while still being able to accommodate a public audience. This struggle between public and private contributed to the second problem of accommodating large crowds. While attendance was on the incline, it became a safety issue for the artworks. Large moving crowds in small spaces could potentially lead to damage and stealing of the artwork. The solution to these problems shifted art exhibition spaces from museum-pure to *museum-like institutions*. *Museum-*

like institutions are solely interested in the exhibiting of the artwork^{viii}. Unlike *museum-pure institutions* which were housed in private residences, *museum-like institutions* typically consist of buildings built for the exhibition of artwork. The space is used to spotlight the artwork instead of enhancing the aesthetic of the space *with* the artwork. The shift into *museum-like institutions* paved the way for traditional white cube exhibition space. White-cube design consist of a rectangular or square room with solid-colored walls, typically painted white, with artworks thoughtfully arranged^{ix}. Many modern museums adopted this ideology because it was the safest way to care for the artwork while moving large crowds in the space. Although white-cube design wants viewers to think freely in space, many museums have unwritten “rules” created from outdated societal norms.

White Cube Exhibition Design

White cube design typically consists of hung artwork evenly spaced on the wall. This design leads to a lot of empty space on the wall (as seen in figure 3^x). Due to the largely empty room with bare walls, sound is easily bounced off the walls. Visitors become aware of their voices being carried in the

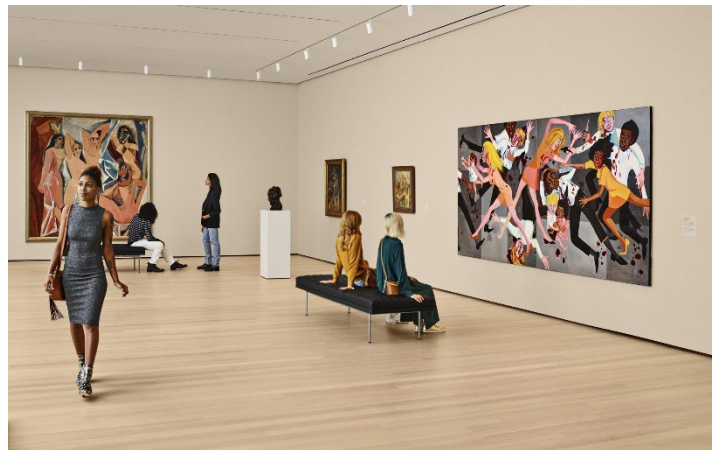


Figure 3. A view of the fifth-floor collection galleries

room, so it leads to a mostly quiet atmosphere. Visitors will stay quiet, so they do not draw unwanted attention to themselves which results in self-reflection. Even though visitors tend to come to museums in group settings, there is a lack of interaction between people. Lastly, art museums mimic the implication of strict time schedules. While visitors are allowed to move around freely, they tend not to linger around artwork and move in directed paths of movement. Lack of seating and interaction with the artwork does not encourage visitors to stay for an indefinite time. The current white cube tradition of exhibition design negatively affects student ability of natural learning. Rethinking traditional white cube exhibition design by adding elements of play can greatly improve art museums’ educational value by allowing students to become an active part in their education.

The Cube Redesigned: Contemporary Artists Rethinking White Cube Exhibition

Although most art museums largely follow the traditional white cube exhibition design, contemporary artists of today are rethinking the cube. Art museums are tasked with showcasing and protecting priceless artistic, cultural, and historical artifacts. With the protection of these as the number one property, introducing elements of play into an art museum presents its own challenges; however, it is possible. Contemporary artists have incorporated interactive elements into their work to eliminate the boundaries between artwork and viewer. Elements of play can be rethought in the context of the visitors and artist interaction with the physical space. From the visitor's point of view, elements of make believe and collaborative play can be incorporated into museums. From the artist's point of view, elements of surprise and playing with the limitations of the space can be incorporated.



Figure 4. Toshiko Horiuchi MacAdam Net Play Exhibition, Kaleidoscape

Toshiko Horiuchi MacAdam

Toshiko Horiuchi MacAdam is a Japanese textile artist who is rethinking the play in museum from the visitor's point of view. MacAdam is famously known for creating large-scale textile play spaces for children. MacAdam uses her interactive yarn installations to challenge the question, "what is fine art?"

Located in the Kaleideum Children's Museum in

North Carolina, MacAdam installed a large hand-knitted yarn installation suspended in the air named 'Kaleidoscape' (figure 4^{xi}). The permanent installation allows children to jump, run and climb through while learning about the limitations of their bodies. MacAdam's design of the installation incorporates elements of collaborative play and make-believe. Even though the children are playing in the physical realm, they are mentally transported to another world. Also, the children interact with each other as they play. Incorporating elements of make believe and collaborative play in art museums will foster natural learning in students. Students can mimic persona and personalities found in artworks to create their own narrative. Allowing collaborative play in the form of conversation will permit students to create a continuous cycle of learning between each other. Incorporating elements of play for visitors will encourage organic learning.



Figure 5. James Turrell, *Blue Wall or Doorway*

James Turrell

In the more traditional exhibition space, James Turrell is rethinking elements of play in the point of view of the artist. Turrell is an American artist who is known for his work in the light and space movement. The light and space movement is centered around the use of geometric shapes and light and its effect on the viewers'

perception of an environment. Turrell uses colorful light and shapes to change the appearance of the space. Turrell describes his use of light as "... not so much something that reveals as it is itself the revelation^{xiii}." Instead of using light to see other artworks, Turrell transforms light into a piece of art itself. Turrell uses play to enhance the exhibiting of his installations. Turrell plays with the interaction of his works with the space around. Many of Turrell's installations are based on the physical space they are housed in. In his light, installation *Blue Wall or Doorway* (as seen in figure 5^{xiii}), Turrell changes the viewer's perspective of the exhibition space with his light installations. In addition, Turrell plays with the element of surprise and anticipation. The artist and viewers must wait anxiously until the installation is finished because his installations are largely based on the space they are held in. Artists incorporating elements of play can rewrite the traditional exhibition design.

Conclusion

In conclusion, educators use art museums as non-traditional learning spaces for students. Traditional classroom design of teacher lecturing to students does not involve students in the leaning process. On the other hand, art museums encourage natural learning by actively involving students in their learning. Although art museums are seen as learning spaces, the architectural shift of art museums has negatively affected their educational influence. White cube exhibition design lacks elements of play with the ideology of "look but don't touch." Introducing elements of play for visitors allows free exploration and natural learning. Students can make personal connections with artwork which creates long lasting memories. Also, artists applying elements of play are changing the ideology around traditional exhibition design. Playing with the

interaction between artwork and space, artists can create unique site-specific exhibitions. Implementing elements of play in art museums can forever change their notions as educational spaces.

ⁱ IGI Global definition of “What is Traditional Classroom.” <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/traditional-classroom/30337#:~:text=1.,students%20is%20face%20to%20face>.

ⁱⁱ Image found in “Challenging Traditional Assumptions and Rethinking Learning Spaces” in *Learning Spaces*. Educause, 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ Chism, Nancy Van Note. “Challenging Traditional Assumptions and Rethinking Learning Spaces” in *Learning Spaces*. Educause, 2006.

^{iv} McPherson, Amy and Saltmarsh, Sue. “Bodies and Affect in Nontraditional Learning Spaces,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, vol. 49, no. 8, 832-841. 2017.

^v Mayer, Melinda M. “Bridging the Theory-Practice Divide in Contemporary Art Museum Education.” *Art Education*, vol. 58, no. 2, 13 – 17. 2005.

^{vi} Definition taken from Davis, Douglas. “Chapter One: The Museum Impossible,” in *The Museum Transformed*. Abbeville Press, New York. 1933.

^{vii} Image found on Encyclopædia Britannica. “Louvre Museum.” Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Louvre-Museum>.

^{viii} Definition taken from Davis, Douglas. “Chapter One: The Museum Impossible,” in *The Museum Transformed*. Abbeville Press, New York. 1933.

^{ix} O’Doherty, Brian. “The Eye and the Spectator,” in *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. The Lapis Press, 1986.

^x Kalina, Noah. “A view of the fifth-floor collection galleries.” Photograph. *Museum of Modern Art*. <https://www.moma.org/about/new-moma> (accessed November 13, 2022).

^{xi} Goudy, Gayle L. “Adventure Play in Physical and Virtual Spaces” in *Design History Beyond the Canon*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.

^{xii} Quoted from Kosky, Jeffrey L., “James Turrell, Works With Light,” in *Arts of Wonder*. The University of Chicago Press, 2013. P 94

^{xiii} Hooper, Cynthia. “Blue Wall or Doorway,” Photograph, 2011.