



Museums and Wellbeing: An Overview on Emerging Architectural and Museographic Trends

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ABSTRACT: In the last decade, the connection between museums and health has started to be explored and documented by a growing body of evidence, which has highlighted not only the power of artworks but also the potential of displays in enhancing visitors' wellbeing, by offering creative or even therapeutic stimuli that can result in physical, psychological and emotional benefits. As this topic is gaining a central role in the agenda of contemporary institutions, the paper aims to draw attention on the impact of this phenomenon on the design of museums' spaces and settings, that are addressing the related tasks through the integration of new rooms and the experimentation with innovative museographic strategies.

KEYWORDS: Museums and Wellbeing; Museum Architecture; Museography; Interdisciplinary Design

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I. INTRODUCTION

As widely investigated, in the last decades the evolution path of the museum was accelerated by the challenges posed by profound changes in cultural, social and economic contexts, which have solicited the renewal of its objectives and practices, the addition of new functions, and the development of innovative instruments [1]. This process is advancing pervasively in all areas of this institution, generating a remarkable increase in the complexity of the different programs that define and enable its role and its functioning.

One of the aspects in which the impact of this scenario manifests itself concerns the experimentation with unprecedented contaminations among the disciplines that traditionally cohere in the project of the museum (those revolving around conservation, curatorship, communication, exhibition design and interior architecture), but also the development of new synergies between these and other fields, that intersect and entwine a wider range of themes, strategies and tools. Among the most relevant outcomes of these processes, it is interesting to highlight those resulting from the integration of the contributions from medical, behavioral and psychosocial sciences.

This phenomenon is growing in the framework of a general increase of interest for wellbeing issues. Over the course of the 20th century, drawing on the development of modern ideas about health and the body, these have been gradually absorbed among the thematic ganglia of architectural theory and practice [2] and, as a result of past as well as recent events (such as the Covid-19 pandemic), they were given a more and more important role in the design culture. Although traditionally referred to the project of hospitals and care homes, today the connections between people's psycho-physical conditions and the qualities of space (and the possibility for it to perform a therapeutic function) have been assimilated into the planning of many types of places [3].

II. MUSEUMS AND WELLBEING

The integration of health-related tasks into museum programs has begun several years ago [4]; primarily, this has been articulated around the development of innovative contents, and in particular the experimentation with new ways of using collections [5] to interact with and offer possibly therapeutic experiences to certain types of audience with special needs (e.g. people with disabilities, cognitive difficulties, or degenerative diseases) [6]. These initiatives originated in art museums, in relation to the recognized potential of artworks and artistic activities as tools for healing, consolation and wellbeing [7], but have subsequently been adopted by many other institutions, enhancing the trial of a wider range of applications and their acknowledgment as a codified practice (i.e. "museotherapy" [8]).

While a significant body of work is already available around the shaping of the model of a “mindful museum” [9], a “healing museum” [10], a “caring museum” [11] and a “brain-friendly museum” [12], the outcomes of this process on the design of spaces and settings have not been properly investigated yet.

The earliest experimentations took place in archives and galleries, and did not involve the implementation of any particular transformation (except for the temporary installation of seating and supports, where not already available). However, in recent years some institutions have started to integrate new types of environments, devices and museographic strategies specifically designed to improve the health and wellbeing of visitors (and sometimes of their staff as well). These projects draw on the possibility to use spatial experiences to generate positive impacts on the psycho-physical conditions of visitors, for example by contributing to trigger healing processes, to combat anxiety and stress, to increase self-esteem, to reduce social isolation, and to lead healthier and even longer lives. Despite the relevant body of theoretic and practical evidence that is already validating this potential, the development of wellbeing-oriented active spaces and settings is still in-progress and represent an important work-field for the evolution of contemporary museums.

III. DEVELOPING NEW TYPES OF MUSEUM SPACE

Some of the results of this process involve the creation of new environments that are added to the museum’s spatial program to activate functions that are complementary to those that enable the conservation, study, and presentation of collections and contents. This integration continues the process that throughout the 20th century has expanded the range of activities that cooperate within cultural institutions – starting from the specialization of laboratories for restoration and research, the addition of classrooms and places dedicated to education, entertainment and cultural enjoyment (e.g. concert and lecture halls), the enhancement of the areas dedicated to the reception of the public, where some commercial services such as cafes, restaurants and shops were gradually assimilated, contributing to articulate the relationship between the museum and the city.

The rooms observed here are designed to offer visitors a different kind of space, designed to accommodate practices that should improve health and wellbeing (for example, by allowing users to rest, to relax, to restore a mental and physical balance, to meditate or to pray), and thus enabling the museum to integrate a more intimate dimension, in which people can feel quiet, protected, and free to behave as they wish or need, as if they were in a clinic, in a chapel, or in their own house.

The initial experiences started to appear in the last ten years, and were characterized by more or less extemporaneous solutions – both in their use, as they often merge several activities, and in their layout and spatial features. The first dedicated environments resulted from the refunctionalization of pre-existing rooms, that were equipped with few elements (such as chairs or armchairs), and left undefined in their connotation to avoid any association to specific functions, meanings or a particular cult. The possibility to use these places to operate on psycho-physical conditions was initially based not on their design but rather on the isolation of the visitors in a calm place and the availability of small devices that could help them relax (such as noise-cancelling headphones, stretching equipment, tactile games, coloring books, emotional cards and other sensory items).

Nevertheless, these environments have become the subject of a gradually growing body of research and applications, that have refined their features and they quality. This process developed in parallel with the broadening of the meaning attributed to these places. If these were initially specifically dedicated to users with behavioral or sensory disorders (e.g. those related to autism or Alzheimer), who may be overwhelmed by the intensity of the visit experience and the highly stimulating space of the galleries, in recent years they have been progressively opened to the entire public. This shift highlights a widening of the tasks associated to these rooms, that started to be meant to address a variety of conditions and needs, also related to stress, anxiety, or simply “museum fatigue” [13]. The multiplication of these experimentations led to the gradual refinement of the role and identity of these environments, and highlighted some essential characters around which their design is developed.

These include primarily a selection of comfortable furnishings, especially seats – usually armchairs, chosen according to their ergonomic features but also to integrate the presence of a “familiar” object, evoking the domestic landscape and thus stimulating visitors to feel in a familiar and safe space. All seats are generally movable and adjustable, to suit different needs, and sometimes they are complemented by elements that enable the modulation of various levels of privacy (such as a high backrest, that embraces the user and produces a kind of alcove, as in the Calm Room installed at the National Gallery in Singapore, designed in collaboration with Dawn-Joy Leong, artist-researcher in autism and neurodiversity). Normally, margins also play an active role in the functioning of these spaces, either because they can be covered with sound-absorbing materials, and thus help to enhance the feeling of isolation and protection, or through installations applying color therapy principles. In fact, these rooms normally accommodate multi-sensory experimentations, which strategically use lights, colors, sounds and smells, putting into practice certain integrative therapies (combining the precepts of traditional medicine with those of complementary and alternative disciplines) to induce specific psycho-physical reactions, that may be oriented toward pain control, relaxation, or concentration. An emblematic example is the

design of the sensory decompression room within the Science Museum MUSE in Trento, a “calm space” inspired by the Snoezelen approach [14], in which soft seating and installations using fiber optics, music, aromas and tactile materials are used to promote relaxation, wellbeing and new relations between visitors and the museum’s path.

A feature cohering all the experiences observed is the development of design solutions aimed to guarantee a high level of flexibility, and to offer the opportunity to adapt the use, configuration and qualities of these environments to respond to a range of needs, not only because the people who use them to overcome their difficulties may have different requirements, but also to open them up to a variety of functions and opportunities. The most commonly adopted strategies include the possibility to move furniture and to easily change the organization of the room, for example by isolating certain parts of it; normally the lights installed are dimmable, and the installations’ color, smell and sound effects can be adjusted.

In some recent projects, the level of “openness” of the program of these places is further increased by the experimentation with groundbreaking interdisciplinary collaborations. Some of these rely on the participation of artists who integrate health-related issues into their work – such as California-based Michelle Montjoy, who created an installation in the New Children’s Museum in San Diego that resulted in the Breathing Room, an environment designed to offer support to neurodivergent visitors through a composition of knitted sculptures aimed at helping regulate the nervous system and restoring a state of quiet and serenity. While this is normally enabled through the visitor’s isolation in a quiet and protected space, in this case the moment of pause is fostered by a highly active environment in which users’ wellbeing is fostered by focusing their attention on such relaxing gestures as hugs and the calming rhythm of breathing [15].

If the outcomes of the collaboration with artists tend to be site-specific in nature, because they are based on a personal research and a peculiar vision, and sometimes even on an attempt to intertwine these experimentations with the museum’s collections and contents, other interdisciplinary initiatives seem to produce advanced models that can be applied in different contexts. The proposal for the Quiet Room designed by Lekker Architects at the National Museum of Singapore, for example, shows some interesting strategies for creating a “safe sensory space.” This project works through the revision of all the features of the room – starting with the margins, which are shaped to sculpt a soft, lap-shaped envelope. The walls are padded and fully sound-proofed, providing isolation from vibration and ambient noise; all the surfaces change in color, adapting to an almost infinite range of saturations that the user can choose and modify. The furniture explore non-traditional solutions that imply the experimentation with different types of appropriation; in fact, no chairs or armchairs are provided, and rather the volumetric articulation of walls and floors offer users many possible ways to sit and lie down. These integrated elements collaborate with a range of soft objects, which can be used as pillows to be hugged, or aggregated to modify the physical environment around the body and the mind’s needs; these devices have specific chromatic and tactile qualities and are characterized by uncoded forms, designed to invite personal exploration and to help shift the sensory experience from discomfort to calm.

These exemplary cases highlight the emergence of a new approach to the design of the rooms dedicated to wellbeing within contemporary museums, the project of which is not focused on the arrangement of “neutral” and quiet spaces, and on the contrary it is based on the realization of highly connoted and active places. On the one hand, their functioning does no longer rely on the organization of equipment but rather on a strategic modeling of margins, objects, surfaces and lights, based on the control of the effect that each element is capable of producing on the perception of different users, giving rise to complex spatial systems that manifest a new kind of interiority. On the other hand, the therapeutic functions of these rooms are not anymore merely related to the isolation of the visitors but are activated by immersing them in new types of experience, capable of acting on their psycho-physical state but also enriching their visit to the museum. Indeed, in some cases, these rooms include thematic characters or devices that echo the contents displayed in the galleries and stimulate their elaboration (for example, by promoting activities that help reinterpret the collections, as in the Sensory Rooms of the Milwaukee Public Museum and the Massillon Museum).

IV. ENVISIONING NEW MUSEOGRAPHIC STRATEGIES

While these experimentations are aimed at expanding and diversifying the spatial and functional program of the museum, through the addition of new types of environments that operate as a complementary service to the institution’s main tasks, other initiatives are currently being developed to explore the possibility of integrating the themes related to health and wellbeing into the design of exhibition spaces and settings.

Some projects exploit the potential therapeutic impact that special displays can exert on a specific type of audience – as observed, for example, in the initiative promoted by the open-air museum Den Gamle By in Aarhus, Denmark, using their knowledge on cultural history to improve the mental wellbeing of people suffering from dementia. The experience was carried out in collaboration with the Municipality and an interdisciplinary group of experts in neurology, psychology and domestic culture, that led to the set up of an exact replica of a 1950s middle class apartment, the House of Memory, which provides patients with an

immersive experience that helps them reminisce their former life and identity, thereby supporting them improve their cognitive health.

Other experimentations stem from the application of mindfulness principles and practices [16] in defining the modalities through which visitors are oriented in enjoying the collections; most of these are based on the organization of meditation sessions within the galleries, in which users are seated and guided in an alternative, multisensory exploration of the works on display. Nevertheless, it is interesting to highlight the current commitment of some museums in transferring these strategies into the museographic design of some rooms.

Some of these experiences are developed in relation to the exhibition of specific works, the content of which reflects or solicits a contemplative enjoyment or a particular state of mind. This approach can be read, for example, in the Room of Quiet Contemplation inside the National Museum of Korea in Seoul, a permanent gallery designed by Choi Wook (ONE O ONE architects), transforming the display of two bronze statues from the 6th and 7th centuries into an experience capable of shaping the psycho-physical disposition of the public. These figures, depicting deities absorbed in meditation, are placed in the center of a “theatrical” space, anticipated by a corridor, enlivened by the projection of a multimedia work which gives visitors the time to get used to the darkness that awaits them in the room; here, they are immersed in a large environment characterized by an ovoid shape, with a diameter of 24 meters, and soft lighting. Surfaces are covered with such materials as earth, charcoal, lacquer and cinnamon, that can absorb sounds, making the space soundproof, and evoke a connection with nature – also stimulated by the ceiling, with an installation reenacting the landscape of a night sky. No furnishings are provided, but the atmosphere and large size of the space rather invite a quiet contemplative walk, slowed down also by a slight slope of the floor, inclined by 1 degree.

It is finally interesting to point out the development of some experimentations in which the application of strategies borrowed from medical or behavioral sciences in the museographic project does not depend on the specific themes or implications of the works on display, but rather it ensues from the intention to test innovative ways of enjoying and elaborating the museum’s contents. An exemplary case is the Room to Breathe at the Manchester Art Gallery, where a special arrangement of the exhibition space was defined by curators and designers through the collaboration with a group of experts in psychological sciences (from Goldsmiths University of London and KU Leuven), with the aim to immerse visitors in an experience capable not only of stimulating different perspectives on the collections but also of improving the users’ psycho-physical health – for example, to control stress and restore inner peace. By rethinking some of the most widespread and established museographic canons, this space is designed to offer the audience the opportunity to focus their attention and make their relationship with the artworks more intense. This task is achieved, for example, through the modulation of all the elements that can over-stimulate them and disperse their concentration – hence limiting the number of paintings on display to one or two, strategically using color schemes and lighting, and avoiding adding captions and descriptions to leave users’ minds free to wander in interpretation – and the arrangement of some strategies fostering new interplays between visitors and the exhibition – by hanging the paintings at a lower height, and thus bringing them closer to people’s eyes, offering special audio guides aimed at orienting innovative insights into the works by incorporating mindfulness principles, and above all by providing comfortable armchairs and sofas, which urge people to spend a certain amount of time in exploring the collection, turning the experience of this room into an opportunity to “take a breath,” slowing down, relaxing and meditating.

V. FINAL REMARKS

The growing commitment of museums all over the world focused on the integration of programs and tools aimed at contributing to improve visitors’ health should not be interpreted as a new phenomenon, but rather as the latest manifestation of an evolutionary path on which these institutions embarked at the beginning of the 20th century, that is updating their *raison d’être* by strengthening their role as social agents [17]. From Australia to Canada, museums are helping people to learn, develop skills, acquire jobs, participate in the public debate and express their identity; the ongoing experimentations dedicated to the activation of wellbeing-improving programs, spaces and settings represent a further step in promoting positive changes on the life of near and far communities.

In particular, these projects represent an enhancement of the work that cultural institutions are developing to improve accessibility, inclusivity and sustainability, which are fundamental fields for interdisciplinary experimentations and the evolution of contemporary museums.

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- [8]. “Museotherapy” is an emerging concept originated in Canada (from a collaboration between the members of *Médecins francophones du Canada* and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts), where as of 2018 it is officially recognized as a medical therapy and can be prescribed to replace medication in supporting the management of specific conditions, such as Alzheimer’s and autism, but also in treating states of anxiety and depression; the practice is based on the widely documented impact that experiences in a museum can stimulate in the production of serotonin, the lowering of stress hormones, the increase in the “emotional quotient” of visitors, and the consequent reduction in behavioral disorders and the incidence rate of dementia, as well as in the improvement of people’s mental and physical balance and their inclusion in active community life.
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- [15]. The installation consists of a series of devices designed by the artist, in collaboration with various engineers, who found a way to make the room physically “breathe” by making the intricate knitted sculptures hanging from the ceiling move in a rhythmic motion that replicates breathing cycles; these elements invite users to focus on breathing, and to regain calm. Hanging on the walls, giant sweaters, padded and with weighted arms, invite users to lean in and wrap themselves in a hug; on the floor, a large rug solicits families to lie down, and large “pods” offer a place to gather and nestle for a relaxing break.
- [16]. The term mindfulness (English translation of the word *sati*, which in the Indian language pali means awareness, attention, mental presence) is used in reference to those practices that use the techniques of cognitive psychology (and particularly meditation) to produce significant improvements in a person’s perception of physical and mental wellbeing.
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