



Figure 1. *Ons Land, Museum Sophiahof, The Hague*

Designing Decolonisation

RECENT SYNOGRAPHICAL INTERVENTIONS IN DUTCH MUSEUMS.

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Summary

This study explores the relationship between decolonial practices in the museum and new museological trends in exhibition design. It uses synographical analysis to deconstruct the cultural and societal values in three exhibitions in the Netherlands. It posits a new framework that explores the inherent coloniality of museums through a new museological lens towards exhibition design. It uses interviews from professionals at each of the exhibitions to inform about the curatorial design choices that make up the exhibition.

It begins by detailing how new museological theory deconstructs spatiality, asserting the role of space as an active feature of meaning making. It then combines this analysis with common features of the decolonial museum, exploring how interpretation is generated through understanding the inherent qualities of space. It then moves on to define space by more than just its physical qualities, also using evidence such as lighting, colour, sound, smell, material and multimedia technology. As such, it explores how spaces can be designed to be reflective, by presenting information in new and engaging ways. It delegitimises the authority of texts and objects as the primary way of viewing the exhibition, to challenge the colonial foundations of the museum. I advocate for new museological approaches towards the exhibition space to transform it into an effective and embodied experience. In doing so, empathy becomes one of the primary ways to understand an exhibition and its content.

Ultimately, the museum will forever remain a neo-colonial institution. However, under a new analytical framework that channels theories from new museology and decolonisation, I assert that exhibition design can transform its neo-colonial qualities for transformative and educational purposes.

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Introduction

In January 2024 the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren, Belgium, opened a temporary exhibition titled “ReThinking Collections”. Similarly, a month later the Royal Academy of Art in London opened “Entangled Pasts 1778-now”, and in October 2024 expected is a new exhibition at The British Museum that reckons with the museum’s collection.

These exhibitions are the newest in a European wide ambition in which museums reckon with their colonial past. By 2024, the decolonisation of museums consists of well researched methodologies that include revising language, narrative, organisational structures, and restitution of objects. With varying ranges of success, decolonising the museum aims to make it an interpretive, critical and reflective place for the history of colonialism. Decolonisation in the museum is also impacted by new trends in museological theory that give specific attention to qualities of the exhibition such as light, movement, sound, interactive features, and the use of the senses to create a space that the visitor feels as well as observes.¹ For example while the perspective of “ReThinking Collections” and “Entangled Pasts 1778-now” critically reflects on language and content (their titles are evidence enough of this) these exhibition also employ design choices that encourage visitors to experience how these exhibitions encourage new perspectives. This study explores the nexus between exhibition design and decolonial practices in the museum.

SYNOGRAPHICAL DESIGN

In new museology, the acknowledgement that synographical design is an active participant in the construction of meaning initially came from post- structuralist deconstruction of power dynamics. First in language, then in spatiality. For example, Donna Haraway (1989) and Carol Duncan (1985) explored how museums can be read as texts by using Saussure’s systems of signification.² Additionally, Mieke Bal discussed the “voice” adopted by exhibition spaces, indicating that museum spaces, not just content or narrative, can have an authority over their audiences. More recently, Suzanne Macleod’s *Reshaping Museum Space: Architecture, Design, Exhibitions* (2005) is an extensive edited volume that recognises the agency of space

¹ Andrea Witcomb, “Toward a Pedagogy of feeling: Understanding How Museums Create a Space for Cross Cultural Encounters,” in *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies: Museum Theory*, ed. by Andrea Witcomb and Kylie Message (John Wiley and Sons, 2015): 322-344.

² Mieke Bal, “Telling, showing, showing off,” *Critical Inquiry*, 18 (Spring, 1992): 556–94.

and design stating that museum users and professionals have the ability “to reshape museum spaces through practices of appropriation”.³ In this volume, the theories of Sophia Psarra and Richard Sandell explain how spatial design can include or exclude communities. Psarra recognises the educational qualities of space and layout, while Sandell provides a concise theoretical model that understands how exhibition design has previously excluded communities.⁴ From both theories I borrow the methodological approach that asserts the agency of space in creating meaning. Similarly, in Sharon Macdonald’s instructional guide *A Companion to Museum Studies*, Tony Bennett’s chapter “Civic Seeing” explores how the visitor of the nineteenth century museum is transformed into a citizen by observing the classification of objects in a rational, authoritative order.⁵ Bennett’s chapter is indicative of new museological analysis in that he deconstructs (colonial) cultural values through analysis of synographical design choices. These ideas were founded in Bennett’s book *The Birth of the Museum* (1995) and remains crucial to understanding how colonial and racial values were perpetuated in the nineteenth century museum. Adopting Bennett’s approach in this study, I deconstruct the cultural values in exhibition design in how they pertain to the decolonisation of museums.

Synographical design techniques are defined by features of the museum that do not pertain to the content of the exhibition itself. Design features relate to aesthetic qualities such as light, sound, colour, and materials. The spatial qualities of exhibitions involve “the relationship to one gallery or object to another”, influencing the flow of movement of the visitor.⁶ Design and spatial features of museums are not passive constructions that have been made uncritically but features of the museum that have been created with purpose and theoretical knowledge by exhibition designers. As I will expand on more in the first chapter, Henri Lefebvre is crucial in understanding the affective qualities of space. He suggests that spaces have more than just their physical qualities but are also environments that mould and change social behaviour.⁷

³ Suzanne Macleod, *Reshaping Museum Space: Architecture, Design, Exhibitions*. (Taylor and Francis Group, 2005).

⁴ Richard Sandell, “Constructing and Communicating Equality: The Social Agency of Space,” in *Reshaping Museum Space: Architecture, Design, Exhibitions* edited by Suzanne MacLeod (Taylor and Francis Group, 2005): 185-200.

⁵ Tony Bennett, “Civic seeing,” in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (Wiley Online Publishing, 2006): 263-281. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.uu.nl/10.1002/9780470996836.ch16>.

⁶ Rhiannon Mason, “Cultural Theory and Museum Studies,” in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (Blackwell Publishing, 2006): 26.

⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *The Social Production of Space* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1992).

THE STATUS OF THE MUSEUM

I begin with the assertion that museums function as neocolonial institutions. Decolonisation is a large societal issue that has garnered much attention in the museum as a visible and powerful feature of society. Central to the debate, which primarily involves revision of collections, organisational practices, and language, is the question: Can the museum truly decolonise, or is it an inherently colonial structure? Is there any way for the museum to decolonise when its inception was rooted in practices riddled with colonial and racist discourses?

For example, Robin Boast revises James Clifford's "Museum as Contact Zone" who advocates for partnerships with indigenous communities to explore complex histories. However, Boast determines that such partnerships are fickle and tokenistic, only serving the good image of the museum not uplifting previously silenced communities.⁸ Moreover, Divya Tolia-Kelly understands the post-colonial exhibition from the indigenous perspective, denouncing the museum as a "theatre of pain" despite efforts to present histories critical and reflectively.⁹ Dan Hicks, although more optimistic about the current state of museology, admits that museums are not at the point yet where they have transcended their coloniality.¹⁰

However, most museological scholars firmly believe that the museum can move past its colonial inception, each with different and inspiring solutions. Authors that have taken up the call for epistemological decolonisation within museum studies include George Okello, Bruno Soares, Vanessa Whittington, Sara Wajid and Racheal Minott. Each of these authors decisively argues for the practical and discursive decolonisation of museums, treating the history of museums as inseparable from colonialism and Western hegemonic power. Soares and Leshchenko call firstly for the academic field of museology to recognise its own power centres.¹¹ It is only then that the language and spatiality of museums can be understood as conduits of power systems that have the potential to shape decolonial societal attitudes. Whittington and Okello, on the other hand, have challenged not only the practices *surrounding* the museum, but features of the exhibition itself that can be improved to reflect societal and academic calls for decolonisation. These typically fall under the categories of transparency,

⁸ Robin Boast, "Neocolonial Collaboration: Museum as Contact Zone Revisited", *Museum Anthropology* 34, no. 1: 56–70. DOI: 10.1111/j.1548-1379.2010.01107.x.

⁹ Divya Tolia Kelly, "Feeling and Being at the (Postcolonial) Museum: Presencing the Affective Politics of 'Race' and Culture," *Sociology* 50, no. 5 (Sage Journal, 2016): 896-912. DOI: 10.1177/0038038516649554.

¹⁰ Dan Hicks, *The British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, colonial violence and cultural restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2021).

¹¹ Bruno Soares, Anna Leshchenko, "Museology in Colonial Contexts: A Call for Decolonisation of Museum Theory," *ICOFOM Study Series* 46 (2018).

awareness, and acknowledgement of the colonial history of an object on display, through language, visitor integration and exhibition design.¹²

Furthermore, Andrea Witcomb's suggestion of a "pedagogy of feeling" in informing cross cultural encounters optimistically assumes that museums can move past their coloniality.¹³ Witcomb asserts that exhibitions have the power to be felt and be understood by visitors on an innate and embodied level. Secondly, Witcomb understands this as essential to the development of cross-cultural encounters between visitors, but also between the museum and its visitors. It implies that if exhibitions are wishing to decolonise, and to participate in current debates involving representation, then affect is integral to this process. It is the tools used by exhibition curators and designers to create such 'affect' that this thesis aims to uncover, highlighting the relevancy of aesthetic and spatial qualities in decolonising practices.

I argue that while museums are fundamentally colonial institutions with inherent colonial qualities, exhibition space and design can transform museum space into an environment that utilises its neo-colonial qualities for transformative and educational purposes. Combining new museological attitudes towards the analysis of space with post-colonial theory towards the decolonisation of museums, I propose a new theoretical approach that indicates exhibition design as fundamental to decolonisation in the museum. Channelling the theories of Okello, Soares, Whittington and Witcomb, alongside approaches from Bennett, Macdonald, Sandell, MacLeod and Psarra, I elaborate on how exhibition design and spatial organisation can move museum away from its position in society as a neocolonial structure.

RELATING EXHIBITION DESIGN TO DECOLONISATION IN THE MUSEUM

The decision to assess how museums have utilised exhibition space and design is a conscious effort to pay more attention to strategies of decolonisation that do not prioritise language or narrative changes. Dan Hicks rightly critiques the position within museums that suggests decolonisation can be achieved by "the mere rewriting of labels or shuffling around stolen objects in new displays that re-tell the history of empire, no matter how critically or self-consciously".¹⁴ Hick's hesitancy at strategies of inclusivity that involve label and narrative re-writing opens a space for exhibition designers and curators to bring new spatial and design techniques into decolonisation of museums.

¹² Vanessa Whittington, "Decolonising the Museum? Dilemmas, possibilities, alternatives," *Culture Unbound* 13, no. 2 (2021): 245-269.

¹³ Witcomb, "Toward".

¹⁴ Hicks, *The British Museum*.

In assessing the overall design and spatial quality of an exhibition means that no one object or theme is prioritised over another.¹⁵ Instead, by observing how exhibition designers have incorporated sensory and aesthetic aspects to the overall narrative of the exhibition, decolonising is reframed as a process to feel and experience, rather than read. There are substantial practical challenges in creating an exhibition in which the design and space reflect the message of the exhibition, mostly related to funding, time, and difference in curatorial intent.¹⁶ But the largest challenge is accepting that no matter the curatorial intent of the design, exhibitions will always be interpreted differently by the multifaceted identities of visitors. Therefore, while this thesis will focus on the choice of exhibition designers in creating reflective and interpretative spaces, it must be acknowledged that visitors are not passive observers of museum exhibitions. Visitors have a dialogue with exhibition design and space which must be fully accepted if museums wish to engage in current political and societal debates.¹⁷

CASE STUDIES IN THE NETHERLANDS

In the Netherlands, there are currently many exhibitions in which design and spatial syntax has intervened in the current decolonial social, academic and political debates. This study looks at three recent exhibitions in the Netherlands that have paid specific attention to the construction of decolonial attitudes outside the traditional perimeters of text and visual indicators. These are:

- *Our Colonial Inheritance*, Wereldmuseum, Amsterdam
- *The Great Indonesian Exhibition*, De Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam
- *Ons Land*, Sophiahof, The Hague.

I aim to investigate the techniques that the exhibition designers and curators of these exhibitions have used to create meaning through new methods of learning such as spatial organisation, visitor interaction and sensorial techniques.

The exhibition *Our Colonial Inheritance* at the Wereldmuseum, Amsterdam, is a new, semi- permanent exhibition that opened in June 2022. Located on the second floor of the museum and arranged in a horseshoe shape, it is made up of 10 rooms that thematically address

¹⁵ Mason, “Cultural Theory”.

¹⁶ Ibid.,

¹⁷ Mette Houlberg Rung, “On Dialogue and Museum as a Social Space,” in *Museums and the Challenge of Change: Old Institutions in a New World* (London: Routledge, 2021): 240-248.

the different legacies of colonialism. The exhibition was designed by two Amsterdam based design groups that define themselves as making “spatial stories”. For example, the second room theme is consumerism and ecological extraction of produce from formerly colonised regions. The design of the room reinforces the message by using green stacking crates as the main material that the exhibition is constructed on. It symbolises the trade and shipping of products, raising questions about the legacy of colonialism on global environmental and ecological processes.¹⁸ In creating *Our Colonial Inheritance*, the Wereldmuseum collaborated with over 200 people from varying communities to ensure that power and authority was ceded to communities that the exhibition concerned.¹⁹ However, the exhibition is also important because of its synographical design choices that amplify the agency of space in creating interpretive and reflective environments. Features of *Our Colonial Inheritance* that I will analyse are methods of spatial organisation in the form of enclosed spaces and patterns of movement.

The Great Indonesian Exhibition at De Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam, aims to explore the history of Indonesia from the ancient Majapahit empire to the present day. The visitor enters the exhibition through a narrow entrance into a circular space on which the walls are covered with facts and statistics relating to present day Indonesia, indicative of the exhibition's mission to “learn about history, but also discover new narratives and silent histories”.²⁰ One feature of *The Great Indonesian Exhibition* I will analyse is its location inside De Nieuwe Kerk. Curators and designers of the exhibition had to navigate the pre-given spatial qualities of the church. It creates interesting juxtapositions because visitors observe the history of Indonesian in a space that is surrounded by discourses of ceremony, ritual and spirituality. Other features of analysis include the exhibition's use of olfaction.

Finally, I will analyse the exhibition *Ons Land*, at Sophiahof in The Hague. *Ons Land* is focussed on telling the story of colonialism in Indonesia. Its attention is not on objects, artwork or narrative, but instead on oral histories of eight families as they emigrated to the Netherlands following the end of colonial occupation in Indonesia. It charts the course of these families' experiences through audio clips, using the domesticated setting of Sophiahof to display everyday life in the Netherlands. As well as indicating the importance of multi-perspectivity in exhibitions, the decision to make the firsthand experience of immigrants the focal point of the

¹⁸ “Spaces of Togetherness,” Kossmanndejong, last accessed 12th June 2024.
<https://kossmanndejong.nl/project/our-colonial-heritage/>

¹⁹ Rik Herder, interview with Julie Deschepper as part of Future of Museums course at Utrecht University, 14th December, 2023.

²⁰ “The Great Indonesia Exhibition,” De Nieuwe Kerk Amsterdam, last accessed 12th June 2024.
<https://www.nieuwekerk.nl/en/exhibitions/the-great-indonesia-exhibition/>

exhibition aligns with George Abungu's assertion that immigration and migration are part of human history: "museums, as representation of identity and nation-hood of people, are conflicted on how to promote a sense of identity and belonging in a nationalistic state, while at the same time promoting diversity, freedom of movement, human rights and heritage of inclusivity."²¹ *Ons Land* actively chooses to promote the voices of immigrants not necessarily to change old narratives, but to tell new ones. Features of the exhibition that will be analysed includes its use of multimedia technology and its incorporation of audio guides as the primary way to explore the exhibition.

METHODOLOGY

To understand how exhibition space has been constructed to reflect decolonial attitudes, I conducted a series of interviews with curators and designers from each of the exhibitions. These interviews followed a structured interview style as I only asked questions pertaining to the interviewees experience in a professional capacity. Conducting interviews was useful in exploring the construction of exhibition design as intended meanings are never fully realised by visitors, therefore it was vital to talk to representatives from each of the exhibitions about how it was designed. I have built my analysis from these interviews, which were from a wide range of museum professionals. For the exhibitions *Ons Land* and *The Great Indonesian Exhibition* I spoke to the curators who had many roles in the creation of the exhibitions but were keenly involved in aesthetic and overall design of the exhibitions. For *Our Colonial Inheritance*, I interviewed an employee from the design agency Kossmandejong, who provide a more architectural perspective, owing to the in-depth exploration of spatial organisation in the first chapter. Lastly, I also interviewed the management company that oversaw the creation of *Ons Land*, their perspective was different from the curators and designers but no less invaluable. It provided a depth into the construction of *Ons Land* from a more holistic approach; however it was interesting that even in the management of the exhibition, design was often at the forefront of decisions.

Although I have described the exhibitions separately, I explore specific features through thematically, looking at how design creates interpretive, reflective and empathic spaces. I pay little attention to text and objects in these, focusing on exhibition construction such as lighting, the senses, flow and movement, colour etc. In 2015 Andrea Witcomb asserted that the "second wave" of museum studies emerged in the 2000's. By now, we are firmly rooted in the "poetics

²¹ George Okello Abungu, "Museums: Geopolitics, Decolonisation, Globalisation and Migration", *Museum International*, 71, no. 1-2, (2019): 62-71.

as well as the politics” of the museum.²² Gone are the days in which the museum is an inert, unchangeable, and neutral institution. The construction of exhibitions is now understood as a creative and artistic endeavour, capable of influencing visitor interpretation. For the decolonisation movement, understanding the synographical impact of exhibition construction is imperative to its success as an institution that moves away from its position as a neo-colonial structure in society.

Our Colonial Inheritance, The Great Indonesian Exhibition and Ons Land provide a window into the relationship between exhibition design and decolonisation in the museum. They will provide the answer to questions like: how can spatial organisation of exhibitions contribute to critical practices? How are inherent qualities of space incorporated into an exhibition? How is knowledge production affected by the construction of space? And how can affect (the moving of emotions) be instigated through the aesthetics of the exhibition? In this study, I dissect the specific spatial and design qualities of exhibition practices that coincide with decolonial practices, determining how museums can move away from their position as neocolonial institutions within society.

²² Witcomb, “Toward”.

Chapter One

How has space fostered an interpretive environment in the museum exhibition?

Spatial features of exhibitions help foster a critical and interpretive environment. Scholars such as Andrea Witcomb, Richard Sandell and Sophia Psarra have shown how interpretive spaces can enact decolonial principles in museums. Such spaces remove the authoritarian and linear narrative that has previously marginalised indigenous or minority voices in the history of colonialism.²³ This chapter analyses *Our Colonial Inheritance* and *The Great Indonesia Exhibition* to indicate how they have arranged and organised space in such a manner that enables visitors to interpret the collection and narrative of the museum for themselves. The curators of these exhibition attempted to shift attention from the exhibitions space as a place of knowledge, to a place of refection.

Interpretive exhibitions are achieved by how a space is designed. For example, at the Berlin Humboldt Forum an exhibition titled *Berlin Global* makes visitors answer a series of questions that then determine their path through the exhibition. At the end of the exhibition, the visitor is given a card with their “results” about what kind of global citizen they are. By inviting visitors to actively create their own path means that the museum trusts the visitor to control the narrative of the exhibition.²⁴ In other words, the visitor can interpret the exhibition how they would like. However, it is not only visitor participation that makes *Berlin Global* an interpretive exhibition. As the questions dictate the route that the visitor takes through the exhibition, *Berlin Global* also highlights the significance of how visitors pass through exhibition space. Visitors are encouraged to create their own interpretation through spatial cues that influence their route, attesting to the fact that exhibitions are now experienced as well as observed.

That designers use space as a structuring device to encourage visitor interpretation in the museums suggests we first need to define ‘space’. Henri Lefebvre is the most authorised scholar regarding theories of space. In *The Production of Space* (1974), Lefebvre argues that “every mode of social organisation produces an environment that is a consequence of the social relations it possesses”.²⁵ For the museum, the exhibition space has previously reflected the

²³ Hicks, *The British Museums*.

²⁴ Rung, “On Dialogue,” 246.

²⁵ M. Gottdiener, “A Marx for Our Time: Henri Lefebvre and the Production of Space,” *Sociological Theory* 11, no.1 (March 1993): 132. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/201984>.

museums social role as an institution of knowledge, science, and objectivity.²⁶ The exhibitions in this study typify new museological organisation of space that reflects the new social relations that museums possess in society. One that reflects decolonial attitudes of self-awareness and criticism. The new organisation of space conforms to Lefebvre's understanding of the term as it encompasses more than spatial physicality, but also sensorial features like touch, smell, sound, temperature, airflow, colour, height, feeling.²⁷ Visitor interpretation is not new in museological theory or decolonisation of museums; exhibitions are always up for interpretation. However, I add to these already existing fields an exploration into how designers and curators manipulate space to specifically foster interpretation.

While this study takes 'space' to mean Lefebvre's all-encompassing definition of environment, this first chapter begins with how space is constructed through physical features such as architecture and setting. I first detail how historians and scholars have critiqued exhibition space in relation to decolonial practices. I comment on their theories and indicate how they are relevant to the selected features of each exhibition. After this, I use the exhibitions *Our Colonial Inheritance* and *The Great Indonesian Exhibition*, to argue that curators and designers must primarily understand the agency of space as it impacts how spaces are interpreted. By understanding the agency of space, museums can move away from their position as neocolonial structures in society as it means museums recognise the inherent coloniality of its spaces.

Tony Bennet's *The Birth of the Museum* (1995) indicates a close link between social power, space and design layout. Almost thirty years old, Bennet's powerful assessment of politics, social relations, and culture asserts the importance of space in the construction of exhibitions. Instead, Bennet asserts that "the museums space of representation comes to be reorganised through the use of historicized principles of display" that could be "harnessed to new social purposes".²⁸ Through a Foucauldian analysis of social and colonial power structures, Bennett argues that nineteenth century exhibitions regulated visitors through the spatial layout of architecture and setting. Furthermore, in the last chapter of the book, Bennet discusses the concept of progress. He suggests progress influenced nineteenth and twentieth century organisation of displays, ensuring a performative process, stating that "the evolutionary

²⁶ Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 33.

²⁷ Gottdiener, "A Marx for Our Time".

²⁸ Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 33.

narratives it [progress] instantiated were realised spatially in the form of routes that the visitor was expected-and often obliged-to complete".²⁹

Bennett's foundational idea, that museum space can be harnessed for social purposes through the organisation of space, are vital to my analysis of how recent spatial interventions foster environments of interpretation. I take special care to amplify Lefebvre and Bennet's notion that 'space' cannot be taken for granted as an inactive feature of the exhibition. As I argue in this chapter, spatiality must be taken as an active feature of exhibition. In much the same way that Bennet asserts the importance of space in regulation, I argue that in the exhibitions I have observed, space is organised to regulate multiple perspectives and voices of interpretation.

Richard Sandell's chapter in the edited volume *Reshaping Museum Space: Architecture, design, exhibitions* (2005) provides a theoretical model that analyses museum space through concepts of equality. In "Constructing and Communicating equality", Sandell observes the tendencies in spatial features that are exclusionary, before recommending ways to "promote equality through the combating of prejudices."³⁰ At times, I find Sandell's use of the term 'equality' unclear and unspecified for such a subjective term, but his attempt to close a gap in the academic field is commendable, not least because it enables me in this chapter to identify key features of spatial organisation in the exhibitions that foster an interpretive environment. Sandell proposes a theoretical model of "spatial cues" that exhibitions utilise to promote equality. The first is *compensatory*, typically involving temporary interventions, like adding revised labels, into a permanent exhibition that has been perceived as problematic.³¹ The second spatial intervention is *celebratory*, involving the organisation of more prominent spaces, signifying a more serious reflection from the museum.³² Lastly, and most importantly, are *pluralist* spatial interventions, in which space is organised to promote integration of different cultural perspectives within an interpretive framework.³³ As I am concerned with how this aligns to practices of decolonisation in the museum, I pay specific attention to how *pluralistic* spatial interventions have enabled interpretive spaces.

²⁹ Ibid., 179.

³⁰ Sandell, "Constructing," 185.

³¹ Ibid., 190.

³² Ibid., 191.

³³ Ibid., 192.

Lastly, I explore Bill Hillier and Kali Tzortzi's theory of spatial syntax. For Hillier and Tzortzi, space is defined by its relationship to other spaces, as segregated or integrated. Spatial syntax analysis can be used to understand how spatial layout is both dependent on predetermined social and cultural ideas.³⁴ There is an implicit assumption that the more integrated a space (so the more access a visitor has to each room) it somehow functions more successfully. As I explore in this chapter, if I apply this theory directly onto *Our Colonial Inheritance* and *The Great Indonesian Exhibition*, each space is determined as highly segregated, creating a linear narrative devoid of choice for the visitor. However, using integration levels to assess interpretation is a reductive assessment as it assumes space is only ever integrated or segregated, failing to account for the multiple meanings that are contrived in an individual space by exhibition design.

In sum, this chapter shows how *Our Colonial Inheritance* and *The Great Indonesian Exhibition* illustrate the theories Lefebvre, Bennett, Sandell, Hillier and Tzortzi in action. To do so, it assesses the exhibitions in conjunction with the interviews from the curators and designers themselves, beginning with how flow and movement influence interpretation.

FLOW AND MOVEMENT

In a series of interviews conducted by Philip Scorch for his theory on the museum as an 'experience', one respondent asserted that the flow of the museum space created an emotional reaction as they enjoyed the open space of the exhibition.³⁵ While emotions will be dealt with in Chapter Three, it is significant that it was the architectural design of the exhibition that created this feeling. Evidenced by Bennett in his analysis of how racist and derogatory attitudes of nineteenth-century ethnographic museums were informed by how the exhibition was walked, flow and movement determine narrative.³⁶ Most exhibitions, historical and contemporary maintain a linear narrative so that visitors can make sense of content. So how do curators and exhibition designers ensure that visitor flow and movement do not follow a linear, and thus authoritative narrative? The answer is to construct space, not just content, so that it fosters interpretive and pluralistic perspectives. While curators can strive to create this experience, their work is, of course, always in dialogue with the visitor and thus its reception.³⁷

³⁴ Bill Hillier and Kali Tzortzi, "Space Syntax: The Language of Museum Space," in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, edited by Sharon Macdonald (Blackwell Publishing, 2006): 287.

³⁵ Philipp Schorch, "The experience of a museum space," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 28, no.2, (2013): 194. DOI: 10.1080/09647775.2013.776797

³⁶ Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*.

³⁷ Regan Forrest, "Exhibition Narrative: The Spatial Parameters," *Exhibitionist*, (Spring, 2014).

However, the following section examines creation, setting the issue of reception aside to focus more narrowly on how exhibitions use space to create interpretive environments. It identifies conscious spatial interventions that are pivotal, not their reception.

Flow and movement are embodied into an exhibition in many ways: architecture, structural design features, ceiling height, natural light, and the shape of a room. The design company Kossmanndejong was responsible for the exhibition *Our Colonial Inheritance*. Wendy Snoek, an exhibition designer from Kossmanndejong indicated that the intent of all design features in the exhibition were to create a “Space of Togetherness”.³⁸ Within this space, Snoek adds, individual themes were chosen to subvert the linear, colonial narratives that ethnographic museums like the Wereldmuseum possess/ed. I argue that the overall flow and movement of the exhibition contributes to the success of *Our Colonial Inheritance* in creating an interpretive “Space of Togetherness”. Interpretation firstly takes root in the organisation of space. If museums wish to decolonise, there must be recognition that space does not come secondary to content or narrative, rather all design choices must come from understanding the inherent qualities of space.

For *Our Colonial Inheritance*, an exhibition situated in a colonial style building, ignoring inherent spatial qualities also ignores the history of the Wereldmuseum as an ethnographic museum and its role in perpetuating colonial and racist attitudes in the nineteenth century. Using Hillier and Tzortzi’s integration theory, *Our Colonial Inheritance* adapts and challenges the spatial qualities of the exhibition floor to suit decolonial attitudes that reflect interpretation and multi-perceptiveness. According to Hillier and Tzortzi’s spatial syntax theory, *Our Colonial Inheritance* is an extremely segregated exhibition space as each room only connects to one other room (fig 2).³⁹ It implies that the flow of the exhibition is stagnant and interrupted by the bottleneck that visitors must go through each time they wish to leave a room. Figure 1 indicates these bottleneck exits in red. Furthermore, the linear pathway also implies an oppressive and authoritative narrative, as visitors do not have a choice in how they move through the exhibition space.

³⁸ Wendy Snoek, Spatial Designer for Kossmanndejong, interviewed by Elizabeth Davis on 2nd May 2024.

³⁹ Hillier and Tzortzi, “Spatial Syntax”.

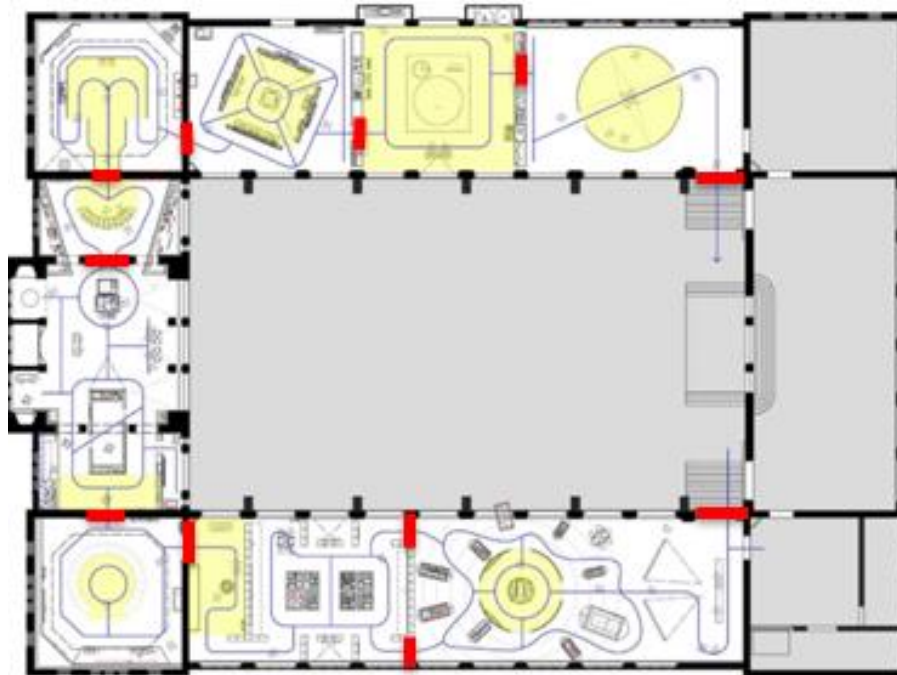


Figure 2. Floorplan of Our Colonial Inheritance, Kossmandejong. Wereldmuseum, Amsterdam.

However, Hillier and Tzortzi’s theory, while useful in outlining how spatial organisation affects flow, it does not align with Snoek’s assertion of a “Space of Togetherness” that is so evidently seen when observing the exhibition. Snoek notes that the colonial architecture of the Wereldmuseum does lend itself to a linear narrative, because that was the way exhibition spaces were first constructed in the nineteenth century. However, that did not limit Kossmandejong to design a space that is interpretive and reflective. Observe the blue line that runs throughout the floorplan (Fig 1). If we take Hillier and Tzortzi’s theory as authoritative, then the line should run straight through these spaces. However, by observing the blue line, we can see that Kossmandejong have created interpretive spaces by fracturing each room in smaller spaces that gives choice to the visitor, juxtaposing the inherent linear narrative built into the Wereldmuseum as a nineteenth-century ethnographic museum. Due to specific design features that have arranged the space accordingly, visitors have multiple options to few one space, as well as paths that are circular and curved to encourage reflection.⁴⁰

From the very first room in the exhibition, visitors are encouraged to find their own way through the space (fig 3). The blue line details an unsymmetrical, uneven route that operates around a central circle. Snoek stated that in this room the space was organised to draw

⁴⁰ Snoek, interviewed by Elizabeth Davis on 2nd May 2024.

visitors to the object in the centre of the circle, but it also offers visitors the chance to walk around the circle first. Moreover, the centre piece is surrounded by circles of blue cloth, creating a ripple like effect that contributes to the gravitational pull that is intended to physically draw visitors into the heart of the room.

Despite the Wereldmuseum's colonial interior, Kossmandejong have understood how spatial organisation can transform linear exhibition environments into spaces that foster interpretation. It indicates that ethnographic museums like the Wereldmuseum must understand their colonial foundations not only in terms of collection, narrative, or institutional organisation, but in spatial characteristics that are inherent to the environment. Space must be seen as an active feature of the exhibition. Failure to do so implies complacency with the inherent structures and discourses that surround the colonial architecture.

Furthermore, ignoring the agency of space ignores all the potential that spatial organisation can have for the overall message of the exhibition. As Sandell suggests in his *pluralistic* mode of spatial interventions, and as I have evidence using *Our Colonial Inheritance*, spatial organisation has the potential to foster multiple perspectives and interpretations.⁴¹ Spatial construction is invaluable in an exhibition concerning the inheritance of Dutch colonialism as the fluid flow of movement allows for critical interpretation of the collection and narrative.



Figure 3. First room, *Our Colonial Inheritance*, Wereldmuseum Amsterdam.

⁴¹ Sandell, "Constructing".

SPACE AND SETTING

As I have observed, the spatial qualities of an exhibition are largely determined by its architecture.⁴² *The Great Indonesian Exhibition* was held in the De Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam, and invites visitor to interpret the exhibition through the juxtaposition of pre-given spatial associations of the church, and the exhibition design itself.

Situated in a fifteenth century church, *The Great Indonesian Exhibition* encompasses an enormous space, blending the grey stone walls of the church with vibrant, colourful depictions of Indonesia (fig 4). The exhibition extends up into the very rafters of the church, giving the space a depth that is unique. As it is held in a church, *The Great Indonesian Exhibition* is organised in an environment which already has pre-given spatial qualities of its own, such as ideas of ceremony, ritual and spirituality. It is important that the exhibition designers are aware of this as objects and collections placed in one context can look, feel, and signify very different meanings when placed in another.⁴³

It was immediately clear when interviewing the Head of Exhibitions at the H'Art Museum (who organised the exhibition) that when planning the initial design of this exhibition, there were challenges and advantages of holding an exhibition in De Nieuwe Kerk. Marlies Kleiterp (who has organised exhibitions in De Nieuwe Kerk before) stated that a decision was made by the design team to hide the church. Kleiterp argued that it was hidden so that “people forget it...people need to have the feeling to step into Indonesia.”⁴⁴ The intent was to cover and conceal as much of the church as possible, ensuring that visitors were only aware of the exhibition itself, and not the ecclesiastical setting around them. The height of the church was a large factor here, Kleiterp stated that the large banners and photos lining the rafters created a “second layer” of the exhibition, one that obscures the grey columns (fig 5). Kleiterp asserts that the banners were organised to create a space that was Indonesian, intimate, and obstructive to the medieval church around it.

⁴² Macleod, *Reshaping*.

⁴³ Paul Jones and Suzanne MacLeod, “Museum Architecture Matters,” *Museum and Society* 14, no. 1 (March 2016): 207.

⁴⁴ Marlies Kleiterp, Curator at H'Art Museum, interviewed by Elizabeth Davis on 11th April 2024.



Figure 4. Entrance to The Great Indonesian Exhibition. De Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam.

However, when asked about how the themes for each space were organised, Kleiterp made clear that the easiest way was to follow the design that the church lays out.⁴⁵ Similarly, there was active effort in the design to include two chapels that acted as a “sidestep” into other stories surrounding Indonesian Independence and World War Two. Kleiterp stated that the chapels present a “calm atmosphere, so you can really be a little bit off the traffic” of the main pathway.⁴⁶ Moreover, there is acknowledgement from Kleiterp that the calm atmosphere is because of the pre-given spatial qualities of De Nieuwe Kerk as a church. In churches, people often adopt an aura of reverence, respect and serenity. In an exhibition space, visitors also adopt this aura, prompting more diligent focus on the exhibition.

There are two seemingly different uses of the church setting. On one hand it is to be hidden and made redundant. On the other hand, the pre-given spatial qualities of the church are used to benefit the exhibition. The juxtaposition in spatial organisation is beneficial because it creates meaning.⁴⁷ Indicated in the floorplan, both chapels are incorporated into the theme of “Revolution” (fig 6). The first details the experiences of Dutch citizens placed in camps after the declaration of independence in 1945, while the second chapel contains contemporary art reflecting the rise of communism in Indonesia after the Second World War. When stepping into these chapels, the space is dark, small, sombre, and quiet, contrasting the hustle of the spacious

⁴⁵ Kleiterp, interviewed by Elizabeth Davis on 11th April 2024.

⁴⁶ Ibid.,

⁴⁷ Witcomb, “Toward,” 323.

and colourful main channel of the exhibition. The juxtaposition alerts the visitor, like an alarm bell, because the environment of the chapel is so different from where they entered from. In Witcomb's "pedagogy of feeling", she explores how juxtaposition encourages interpretation of "individual stories and across stories within the exhibition as a whole."⁴⁸ Therefore, understanding how to incorporate such juxtaposition into the design of an exhibition is vital in establishing a narrative that visitors can explore and interpret on their own.

It further reinforces my argument that for exhibitions like *The Great Indonesian Exhibition*, there must first be a deep understanding of the spatial qualities they are working with, not in.



Figure 5. Banners creating a "second layer" of the exhibition, *The Great Indonesian Exhibition*.

While it was clear from Kleiterp that the intention of the curators and designers was to remove the setting of the church from the exhibition, I believe the exhibition succeeds because it was also beneficial to incorporate the spatial qualities of the church. The result is that the juxtaposition of different spaces subverts intended meanings, which opens all realms of interpretive associations within the exhibition.⁴⁹ Space deserves an active role in the design of exhibitions that claim a postcolonial reflection on themes of colonialism and racism because of

⁴⁸ Ibid.,

⁴⁹ Mieke Bal, "Exhibition as Film," in *Exhibition Experiments*, ed. by Sharon Macdonald and Paul Basu (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007): 71-93.

how it can be organised into interpretive environments capable of social change.⁵⁰ As seen in *The Great Indonesian Exhibition*, when this is done, the potential of using space is a powerful force in the decolonisation process.

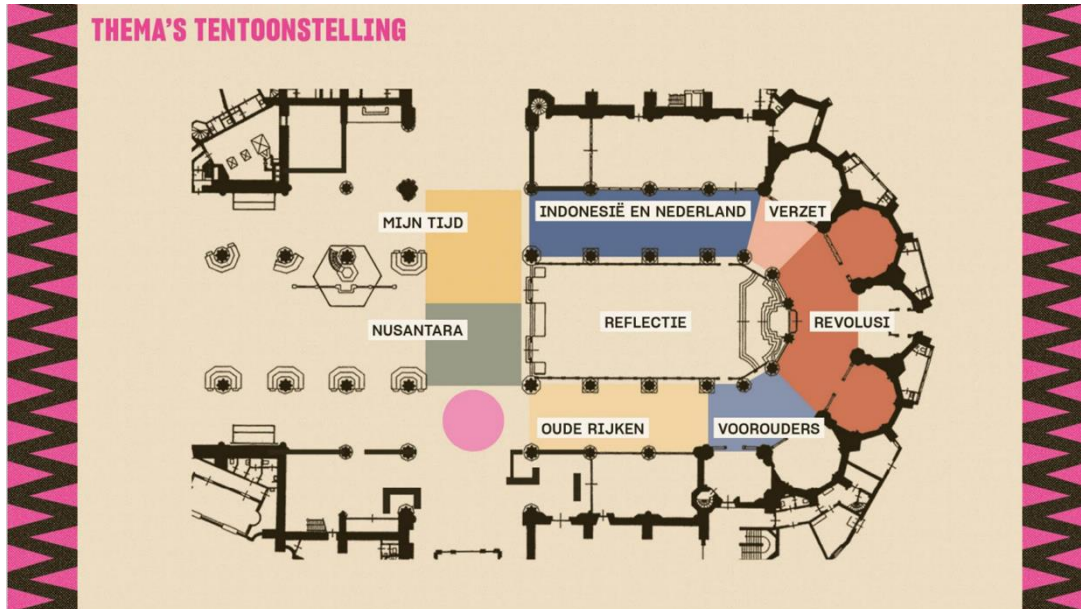


Figure 6. Floorplan, *The Great Indonesian Exhibition*, *De Nieuwe Kerk*.

In conclusion, spatial organisation is immensely important to how exhibitions create environments that are interpretive. The spatial configurations of *Our Colonial Inheritance* and *The Great Indonesian Exhibition* indicates the importance of firstly understanding how space functions. Interpretation is an important quality of decolonisation precisely because it destabilises the linear and authoritative narrative that undermine postcolonial histories and cultures.

Although *Our Colonial Inheritance* could be viewed as a highly segregated and linear space, the implanting of spatial structures like the blue fabric means visitors have multiple options to explore one space. The result is an individual experience of the museum that allows for multiple interpretations. In *The Great Indonesian Exhibition*, interpretation was created through the juxtaposition of the setting as a church and the exhibition design. Although the curatorial intent was to hide the church, there were times when the church “shines through”, and this worked to the advantages of the designers. The awareness of the difference in

⁵⁰ Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*.

architectural/ design style allowed the visitor to establish their own interpretation of the exhibition.

Spatial organisation functions as a regulator of interpretation. While Kossmandjong mould and refute the pre-given spatial qualities of the Wereldmuseum in *Our Colonial Inheritance*, Kleiterp explores how there is room for nuance in the extent that architecture and aesthetic style can be incorporated into the exhibition. In each case, there is still a fundamental understanding of the discourses that surround each of the buildings, which cannot be ignored if an exhibition wishes to promote a space that is interpretive. Promoting decolonial attitudes in an exhibition begins with understanding the agency of space in informing such attitudes. As the next two chapters evidence, once space is on equal footing with content and narrative of an exhibition, there is so much potential to design environments that are more than just interpretive, but also reflective and empathetic.

Chapter Two

Designing Engaging Spaces for Reflection.

Expanding on the last chapter that focussed on the spatial layout of exhibitions, this chapter explores how exhibition design promotes visitor engagement. It builds on Lefebvre's theory that space encompasses more than its physicality, but also features like light, sound, and colour affect how a space is perceived.⁵¹ Building on museological theory, space is understood as an ecosystem, in which there are multiple design features that create, rework, and express meaning in varying ways.⁵² The purpose of this chapter is to understand how the exhibition ecosystem promotes visitor engagement, through presenting information in new, dynamic ways. The chapter takes evidence from the interviews regarding *Ons Land* and *Our Colonial Inheritance* to explore how designers and curators have used the agency of space to instigate new methods of knowledge production.

New museological practices have largely decentred the total authority of objects and narrative in informing visitors. Now, the museological field finds itself deep into studies that evaluate the reaction of visitors using visitor surveyors, crowdsourcing, and visiting patterns.⁵³ In each of the interviews I conducted, it was clear that every design decision was made so that it was accessible to the visitor, using design techniques, rather than text, to educate. Designing new ways to promote visitor engagement is important to decolonisation because of the museum's role as an educational institution that seeks to inform and challenge societal dilemmas.⁵⁴ As the impartial or neutral museum no longer exists (or has never existed⁵⁵), reflecting is a necessary part of decolonisation as it encourages critique and debate.⁵⁶ I argue that opening such dialogues are crucial if museums are going to succeed in decolonising, and if they want to stay relevant in society.

I begin by outlining how museums studies has previously understood the relationship between exhibition design and visitor participation, highlighting the theories and methodologies that are useful to my understanding of the reflective exhibition. Then, I analyse

⁵¹ Andrew Merrifield, *Henri Lefebvre : A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006) Accessed April 9, 2024. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁵² Arnold P. O. S. Vermeeren, Licia Calvi, Amalia Sabiescu, Raffaella Trocchianesi, Dagny Stuedahl, Elisa Giaccardi and Sara Radice, "Future Museum Experience: Crowds, Ecosystems and Novel Technologies". 1-19.

⁵³ Laura Martin, Lynn Uyen Tran, Doris Ash, *The Reflective Museum Practitioner: Expanding Practice in Science Museums* (Routledge, 2019).

⁵⁴ Gail J. Chrystlee, "Creating Museums That Change People's Lives: Operationalising the Notion of Restorative Environments," *The Journal of Museum Education* 20, no. 1 (winter 1995): 17.

⁵⁵ Dan Hicks, *The British Museums*.

⁵⁶ Chrystlee, "Creating Museums," 2.

the exhibition *Ons Land* with specific attention to the use of multimedia technologies as tools to promote visitor engagement and reflection. I move on to analysis of enclosed spaces in *Our Colonial Inheritance* as another tool used by designers to help convey information that engages the visitor in deep reflection.

I would like to note that these two features of visitor engagement are very different. Analysing them as separate entities also exemplifies this difference. However, as argued by Lefebvre, the ecosystem of space works as a unified whole, and as Frank den Ousten stated: “An exhibition is about the relation between things.”⁵⁷ Therefore, while I analyse these features separately, the museum exhibition should always be understood as one environment that contains multiple layers of meaning. It is only for the sake of understanding specific reflective practices that I have decided to analyse them separately.

Exhibition design aids visitor participation in many ways. From allowing the visitor to be a part of the exhibition content, to simply making sure all feel welcome and included. Graham Black, in his edited volume *Museums and the Challenge of Change (2021)*, designed a theoretical model that details how a participative museum environment can be achieved.⁵⁸ Black provides a range of possibilities for visitor engagement, such as multi-purpose spaces and the placing of help desks and staff.⁵⁹ However, the most important feature for decolonisation is the assertion of *reflection zones*, as spaces that promote social learning and critical enquiry. Black identifies the following key features for a *reflection zone* as circular seating or spaces with books or articles, ‘conversation spaces’, people watching, opportunities to practice activity, feedback forms, and online content.⁶⁰ Black’s *reflection zones* are important to decolonisation in exhibitions as, the moment a visitor gets to pause, think, talk and feel the exhibition, dispels the authoritative narrative that characterises museums as a neo-colonial structure.

Gail Chryslée offers insights into how and why museums should centre visitor engagement. Most importantly is the suggestion that exhibitions should create restorative environments to combat directed attention fatigue (DAF). Restorative environments give visitors the chance to stop, recover, and think. The framework that Chryslée provides asserts five factors that create restorative environments: *being away, extent, fascination, compatibility,*

⁵⁷ Frank den Ousten, *Space.Time.Narrative – The Exhibition as Post-spectacular Stage* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012).

⁵⁸ Graham Black, “Creating an Inclusive and Participative Museum Environment,” in *Museums and the Challenge of Change: Old Institutions in a New World* (London: Routledge, 2021): 160-171.

⁵⁹ Black, “Creating,” 169.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

and *esthetic*. I will not go into depth about each factor here, as they are not all relevant. However, *fascination* comprises features of an exhibition that are inherently interesting and engaging with the key principle being that in these moments of the exhibition, the visitor does not require extra energy to be interested in the exhibition. It is during these moments that visitors are prompted to reflect on all they have seen, read, heard, and felt.

Using the frameworks provided by Black and Chrystlee, I argue that successful decolonisation in the exhibition space is achieved if we understand one basic principle; that visitors and the museum must be engaged in a dialogue that explores how and why museums have previously silenced indigenous and minority communities. There must continuous and conscientious dialogue that poses questions, challenges the Eurocentric and neo-colonial attitudes that museums retain or favour. Content, narrative, and language are of course invaluable to this process, but conversation only begins when there is *stimulation* to do so - and this comes from designing exhibitions that are engaging. Therefore, it is only apt to begin with one of the newest ways that exhibitions engage their audiences: the use of multimedia technology.

MULTIMEDIA TECHNOLOGY

Ons Land uses an exhibition design feature unique to the twenty-first century: that of the digital realm. Through varying types of media, exhibitions now include digital features that prompt visitor participation. Multimedia technology in the exhibition can range from audio-guides, videos, virtual reality, robots, visualisation, soundscapes, interactive displays, and animations.⁶¹ Almost all contemporary museums have, to varying degrees, incorporated some of these features. In museums that have no or a only small collections, such as Museum Sophiahof, multimedia technologies are even more important in engaging the visitor.

In doing so, the inherent qualities of space that designers and curators have so dully understood as an active feature of the exhibition are given a new dimension. As outlined in the edited volume *Museum Experience Design: Crowds, Ecosystems and Novel Technologies* (2018), museum experience cannot be detangled from its dependency on multimedia forms of technology.⁶² Max Meijer, an interviewee from the design management company TiMe Amsterdam that oversaw the creation on *Ons Land*, stated in the interview that: “From the start, it was not an exhibition about objects, it was clear that was a cross-media approach, and that

⁶¹ Tula Giannini and Jonathan Bowen, “Rethinking Museum Exhibitions: Merging Physical and Digital Culture- Past and Present,” in *Museums and Digital Culture* ed. by Tula Giannini and Jonathan P. Bowen (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2019): 63.

⁶² Vermeeren, et al, “Future Museum Experience: Crowds, Ecosystems and Novel Technologies”.

created a different mindset.”⁶³ Evidently, being a museum that does not rely on a collection means that information must be presented from a different perspective. This “mindset” takes the assumption that exhibition spaces are places where visitors can relax and reflect. For example, *Ons Land* succeeds in creating an exhibition that does not feel confined to the five small rooms of Museum Sophiahof. Studies have shown that the proximity of some spaces can make the visitor feel restricted and ‘stuck’ – even in huge galleries, walls can become oppressive.⁶⁴ Multimedia features provide an additional space for visitors to occupy whilst still inside the exhibition, generally making them feel less confined in the small setting.

Once such example is a video installation in room four (fig 7). This room is titled “The Dutch East Indies: Shifting Impressions”. It acknowledges the violent and exploitative colonial past whilst simultaneously dismantling the colonial narrative that has romanticised the colonisation of Indonesia. The information text states: “The idyllic and peaceful Dutch East Indies never actually existed”, a powerful and forceful statement that confronts the visitor with an uncomfortable truth, and one that is reinforced with the use of a video installation.

⁶³ Max Meijer, TiMe Amsterdam, interviewed by Elizabeth Davis on 25th of April 2024.

⁶⁴ Giannini and Bowen, “Museums”, 34.



Figure 7. Room 4 of *Ons Land*, indicating video installation. Museum Sophiahof, The Hague.

The video installation consists of a series of videos that begin playing when a visitor selects an image. They do this by moving a light so that it illuminates an image (fig 8). Margaret Leidelmeijer, coordinator of exhibitions at Museum Sophiahof, further reinforces the different “mindset” that Meijer detailed, by indicating that the video installation was to keep visitors focussed and engaged in the exhibition.⁶⁵ Chryslée’s notion of a restorative environment is central here. It is when the visitor can stop and sit down behind the animation, play with it, listen to the audio, and watch the accompanying video, that the visitor can reflect on all that they have heard and seen in the previous rooms.⁶⁶ In this room, information is present in a

⁶⁵ Margaret Leidelmeijer, Coordinator Knowledge Centre and Exhibitions at the Indian Remembrance Centre, interviewed by Elizabeth Davis on 24th April 2024.

⁶⁶ Chryslée, “Creating Museums.”

different, fascinating, manner, cuing the visitors to respond differently. Decolonisation in the museum needs to actively seek new ways to present information as, while narratives are changing because of attention to language, representation and perspectives *within* content, I believe that there needs to be more attention paid on how such content is *constructed*, so that it is reflected on to its fullest capacity. Designing multimedia features for visitor participation and reflection also means designing spaces for rest and recovery. There does not have to be huge paragraphs of text or shelves overloaded with objects. *Ons Lands* has designed a room that encourages visitors to participate, relax and reflect, all because the information is presented from a different “mindset” of a “cross-media approach”.

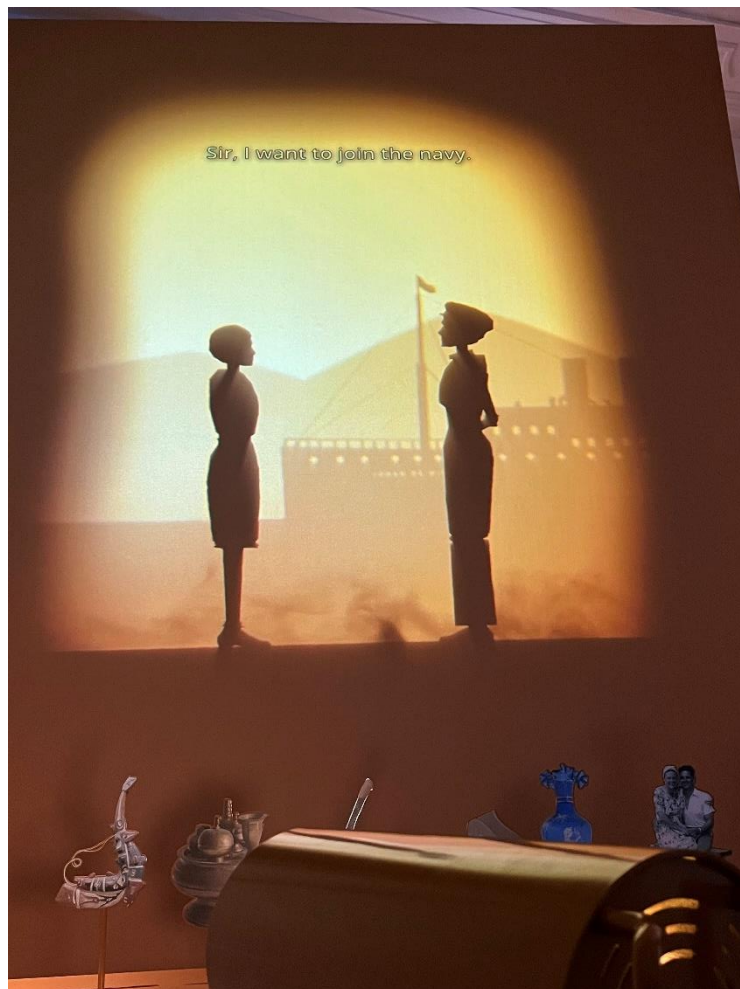


Figure 8. Indicating the images that line the bottom of the 'screen' in Room 4, *Ons Land*. Museum Sophiahof, The Hague.

As the exhibition space works as an ecosystem, this is evidenced further when the whole room is considered. As stipulated by Leidelmeijer, the combination of colour and lighting, set a dark and sombre

atmosphere while the visitor engages with the video installation. The use of colours in exhibitions has been explored by Amos Rapoport, who states that while they should not be overestimated in influencing visitor experience, there are certain connotations with specific lighting and colours.⁶⁷ For example, before entering the room the visitor experiences the sterile, cold, and dreamy like atmosphere of room three titled “The Journey”. The contrast when they enter the dark and orange hues of the tropical rainforest in room four prompts the visitor to reflect on why there is such a shift, a similar technique also employed by the designers of *The Great Indonesian Exhibition* (who juxtaposed the colourful exhibition design with traditional church architecture). In simply understanding how changing colours can induce reflection, *Ons Lands* had indicated how information does not have to be produced through texts or objects. Moreover, the use of juxtaposition is once again evident as fundamental to meaning making, though in *Ons Land* it is through synographical exhibition design rather than inherent spatial qualities.

As Leidelmeijer reflects on why this room is her favourite, the video installation was intended to prompt a reflective debate about the ramifications of colonialism. By actively being able to choose and sort through all the information themselves, room four of the exhibition typifies Black’s notion of a *reflection zone* in which a conversation has been opened, and dialogue has begun.⁶⁸ With no collection to decolonise, *Ons Land* positions itself as a promising example of how important presenting information in an engaging manner is to reflective practices, whilst also evidencing how enmeshed the exhibition space is to the new digital dimension.

ENCLOSED SPACES

Multimedia technology is not the only way that information is made engaging in exhibitions, nor is it the only way that promotes reflection. As explored in Chapter One, the organisation of space in exhibition environments can change and inform visitor behaviour, yet these spaces work in tandem with other physical features of the exhibition such as decoration, colour, and materials.⁶⁹ For example, enclosed spaces mean that when a visitor enters this space, they are removed from the larger gallery and may occupy the space alone. The most common ways to create such a space are physical barriers, such as screens or curtains, but also features like light, sound, and colour.

⁶⁷ Amos Rapoport, *The Meaning of the Built Environment: A Nonverbal Communication Approach* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1982): 114.

⁶⁸ Black, “Creating.”

⁶⁹ Chryslée, “Creating Museums.”

In *Our Colonial Inheritance*, there is a box-like structure that separates itself from the rest of the room. Located in room four of the exhibition (fig 9, red circle), the box displays racist and stereotypical images of Black people, as well as ethnographic objects such as cranial measurers, indicating the Wereldmuseum’s past as a colonial institution. Wendy Snoek stipulates that as these images and objects are distressing, the box was designed so that visitors can choose whether they want to enter such a space.⁷⁰

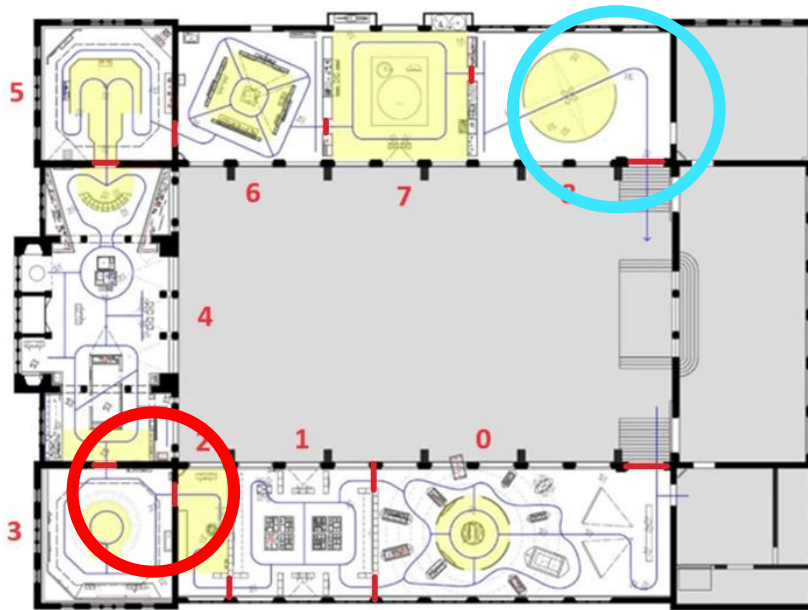


Figure 9. Floorplan of *Our Colonial Inheritance* indicated box structure in red circle. Kossmanndejong, added circles. Wereldmuseum, Amsterdam.

Before entering the box, the room is filled with mirrors that implicate the visitor in the exhibition as they see themselves next to rows of objects (fig 10).⁷¹ As Snoek asserts, the room offers the visitor a chance to reflect on questions such as: How do you view these images? What internalised stereotypes do you hold, and are you ready for them to be challenged? The visitor can then decide if they wish to enter the box. Joachim Klein has observed through visitor surveys that guided routes or “didactic walking paths” produce a cognitive tension for visitors, preventing them from establishing connection to the museum space.⁷² Therefore, the box like structure in *Our Colonial Inheritance* offers an opportunity for visitors to explore comfortably, reflecting on whether they wish to enter the room.

⁷⁰ Snoek, interviewed by Elizabeth Davis on 5th May 2024.

⁷¹ Jane Ingram Allen, “Expanding Space/Engaging Viewers: Mirrors and Reflective Materials in Contemporary Sculpture,” *Sculpture* (November 1, 2004)

⁷² Hans-Joachim Klein, "Tracking Visitor Circulation in Museum Settings," *Environment and Behaviour* 25, no. 6 (1993): 782-800.

Furthermore, Snook indicates that the museum isolates such objects and images so that



Figure 10. Entrance to room 4, highlighting use of mirrors, *Our Colonial Inheritance*. Wereldmuseum, Amsterdam.

their racist nature is prevented from being observed uncritically. The change in physical space alerts the visitor to a shift in how the objects are to be viewed. The enclosed space is important to decolonisation in the museum as, if museums are written off based on their colonial collection, we “ignore its capacity to be recreated in the present”.⁷³ There is room for colonial collections to be redefined by postcolonial researchers, indigenous groups, and anti-colonial activists, to create a narrative that is critical and reflective. As evidenced in the box like structure in *Our Colonial Inheritance*; by presenting the information in critical way, it is far more rewarding to reflect on why such images exist in the first place. The box engages the visitor by presenting information not in a straightforward manner; the significance of the objects and images in the box is shown rather than stated, prompting reflection.

Not all aspects of enclosed spaces are successful in engaging the visitor in reflection. The last room in *Our Colonial Inheritance* (see fig 9, blue circle) offers a chance for visitors to be educated about their role in the wider societal debate regarding colonial inheritance. It combines the use of multimedia technology and enclosed spaces to create a *reflection zone*. When the

⁷³ Whittington, “Decolonising the Museum”.

visitor stands in a certain place, a specific video starts playing that indicates one way that visitors can participate in the wider societal debate outside the exhibition. When discussing *Ons Land*, Meijer and Timmer's indicated how abruptly the exhibition comes to an end, with the visitor chucked out into the rest of the building. Similarly, Snoek also recognises the same fate for *Our Colonial Inheritance*. While Snoek asserts that this enclosed space aligned with the overall "Space of Togetherness" as visitors often gather at the end, she also notes a lack of energy in the overall design.⁷⁴ There are no features or objects that grab attention. The lighting is boring (no colours or flashing), and the circular arrangement is almost too wide, leaving the visitor confused about which direction or video to move towards. The synographical features surrounding the installation do not do justice to the videos, which are themselves extremely poignant. Overall, the reflective power of the space is diminished as people move through it too seamlessly. The reflective potential of the room is lost in translation of the exhibition design, which raises questions about the terms of participation in the production of dialogue in the museum space.⁷⁵ On one hand, too much guidance is conflicting for the visitor, while too little, as in the last room, unfortunately has the same effect that Meijer lamented about in *Ons Land*. The visitor is unable to interpret the significance of this space, simply exiting into the rest of the museum with little reflection on the important themes and issues. The fact that this space is ambiguous in its design intention corresponds to my argument in Chapter One that insists on the importance of understanding the active potential of space, as it directly impacts how successfully space can be interpreted.

Therefore, design features can stimulate engagement by presenting information in different and untraditional ways. However, there needs to be more than just *acknowledgment* that engaging presentation of information is important to reflection, but also deep recognition that space is an active participant in the construction of exhibitions. Museums that are decolonising cannot risk ambiguity in their spaces of reflection as it implies a complacency that obscures the intention of why and how museums wish to decolonise, cementing the museum as a neocolonial structure.

⁷⁴ Snoek, interviewed by Elizabeth Davis on 5th May 2024.

⁷⁵ Bernadette Lynch, "Custom-made reflective practices: can museums realise their capabilities in helping others realise theirs?," *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 26:5, (2011) 441-458. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2011.621731>.

In this chapter I have established an important link between visitor engagement and reflection. By looking at an example of multimedia technology in *Ons Land* and enclosed spaces in *Our Colonial Inheritance*, it can be asserted that visitor engagement is crucial for museums to decolonise. Primarily, this is because engagement promotes reflection, on which the building blocks of a conversation can begin.

The interactive visitor installation in *Ons Land* enables the visitors a moment to pause. In this gap, the visitor can sit and interact with the video, choosing which object they would like to highlight and what story to hear. The room creates a restorative environment by taking the visitor off their feet and by promoting their fascination at an interactive display. The video installation indicates a new way of viewing information that engages the visitor to question and reflect on the exhibition.

In *Our Colonial Inheritance*, the visitor is engaged in a reflective process by an enclosed space, that prompts the visitor to make a choice. The choice means that the visitors can reflect on why the museum has such objects and images. Additionally, *Our Colonial Inheritance* ends with an enclosed, interactive display that highlights informed choices visitors can make after the exhibition has ended. Yet, closer analysis reveals that it is not engaging enough for visitors to understand, let alone participate in.

In both exhibitions, there is the firm acknowledgment that it is *how* content is displayed, not just the content itself, that prompts reflection. While it should be uplifted in *all* aspects of the exhibition, it is imperative that curators and designers recognise reflection as inherent to how an exhibition is designed.

Chapter Three

Using the Senses to Promote Emotion.

The previous chapters have explored how spatial design features of the exhibition are important to the decolonisation of museums through promoting interpretation and reflection. Specifically, the last chapter argued for information and knowledge to be presented so that it engages the visitor in reflection. In the final chapter, I extend this argument by exploring how the senses (touch, taste, smell, hearing, vision) also indicate a new way from knowledge to be presented in the design of an exhibition. I assert that sensorial design features liberate the exhibition space from discourses that determine museums as top-down, rational, authoritative, and recalcitrant to change. Utilising the senses does this by tapping into human emotion, generating empathetic responses.

I indicate how the use of sound and olfaction are utilised in the exhibitions *Ons Land* and *The Great Indonesian Exhibition* to promote emotional responses. Emotion is an integral part of the museum experience. In new museology, the role of emotion and the role of the senses have largely been stood as separate entities, and while there is recognition of how the senses can promote emotional responses, there is yet a comprehensive discussion of how this benefits decolonisation in the museum. Therefore, this chapter seeks to ask the question: how can exhibition design use the senses to draw out emotional responses, and why is this significant to decolonisation?

Using the senses in the museum involves incorporating touch, smell, taste, and hearing into an exhibition. It acknowledges that the exhibition is an embodied experience, one in which the visitor *feels* the exhibition, rather than passively observing information.⁷⁶ In all the interviews conducted for this study, creating an emotional response in the visitor was central to the designers and curators. They did this by not solely relying on vision as the only way to view the exhibition. Understanding the importance of the senses and emotion is thoroughly linked to the decentring of vision as the primary sense in the exhibition.⁷⁷

The museum space regulates and manages emotions; therefore, exhibition curators and designers are well placed to channel this performative power in influencing how audiences feel and receive the exhibition.⁷⁸ I argue that emotions are invaluable to the decolonisation of

⁷⁶ Witcomb, "Toward".

⁷⁷ Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*.

⁷⁸ Laurajane Smith and Gary Campbell, "The Elephant in the Room: Heritage, Affect, and Emotion," in *A Companion to Heritage Studies*, eds. William Logan, Mairead Nic Craith, and Ullrich Kockel (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 443–60.

museums for two reasons. The first is that emotions help us to learn more effectively, an important factor for decolonisation which attempts to subvert old narratives.⁷⁹ Secondly, emotions generate empathy and connection. These emotions can be fostered between individuals, groups, the museum as an institution, or within ones own conscious. In any case, it fuels social connection.⁸⁰ As Alli Burness, an experience designer, states: “emotions join hands with meaning and both ring louder”, attesting to the powerful force that comprehending complex and violent histories at an emotional level can have in fostering empathic and educational responses.⁸¹ Therefore, understanding how the senses can be designed into the exhibition space is fundamental to exploring Witcomb’s “pedagogy of feeling”, in which the exhibition is an affective experience.⁸²

The first part of this chapter explores how scholars have understood the senses in relation to emotion. The chapter then moves onto exploring how sound in *Ons Land* and smell in *The Great Indonesian Exhibition* inform emotional responses, and to what extent this drives the museum out of its position as a neocolonial institution.

Our emotional experience of space is informed by our sensory understanding of it. We often emote not only because of what we can see, but also because of what we can smell, hear, taste and touch.⁸³ In the exhibition, vision is at the top of a “sense hierarchy” that relegates the other senses. However, when visitors leave the exhibition, it is not always specific language or objects that are remembered, as Nina Levent and Alvaro Pascual- Leone surmise:

*“When we leave a museum, we leave behind the giant blue whale, Ben Franklin’s walking stick, Lincoln’s top hat, the Mona Lisa; what we take home is a mental image of the object or work of art, a dynamic image that is coloured by our own preconceptions, the atmosphere of the museum, enthusiasm of the gallery guide, conversations we overhear standing in front of the object.”*⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Linda Norris and Rainey Tisdale, “Developing a Toolkit for Emotion in Museums,” *Exhibition* (Spring 2017): 100-108.

⁸⁰ Norris and Tisdale, “Developing,” 106.

⁸¹ Alli Burness, “Reacting to Objects: Mindfulness, Tech and Emotion: Museum in a Bottle,” *Museum in a Bottle*, June 12th 2024, <https://museuminabottle.com/2013/04/29/reacting-to-objects/>

⁸² Witcomb, “Toward”.

⁸³ Daniela Angelina Jelinčić, Marta Šveb, and Alan E. Stewart, “Designing Sensory Museum Experiences for Visitors’ Emotional Responses,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 37, no. 5 (2021): 513–30. doi:10.1080/09647775.2021.1954985.

⁸⁴ Nina Levent and Alvaro Pascual- Leone, “Introduction,” in *The Multisensory Museum: Cross Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory and Space* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014): p. xx.

The “mental image” of the museum experience will always be a sensory one. Humans absorb, express, and internalise experiences through how they have been felt. In *The Multisensory Museum*, implied throughout is the how it is the senses that promote feeling, increasing the visitor’s capacity to learn and connect with an exhibition. For example, Richard Stevenson argues that olfaction creates strong emotional reactions by bringing the visitor in closer contact with the display and/or evoking long lost memories that help visitors draw connections.⁸⁵ Equally, Stephan R. Arnott and Claude Alain take a scientific approach that determines how certain sounds can heighten certain emotions – think of how most music apps today make playlists based on mood or emotion.⁸⁶

The museum of the nineteenth century ascribed vision as the ultimate act of perception and remains authoritative in how we perceive the museum. Bennett asserts that affective understanding of museum exhibitions destabilises the authority of vision, as meaning is generated through an embodied experience such as touching, tasting, smelling, or hearing.⁸⁷ Therefore, utilising the senses in the museum exhibition acts as a counterpoint to imperial logic and rationality, creating an experience that is not hierarchical or ordered, but encapsulated by a feeling that is beyond words.

Also important to this chapter is the edited volume, *Emotions, Senses, Spaces: Ethnographic Engagement and Intersections* (2016) by Susan R. Hemer and Alison Dundon. It explores the intersection of emotion and the senses through case studies ranging from Spanish bullrings, Hip Hop venues or public parks in central Adelaide, to village centres and space in rural Papua New Guinea and Indonesia.⁸⁸ Two assertions in this volume are particularly relevant. The first is that emotions are crucial to the relationship between people and space, and the composition of space itself.⁸⁹ Conforming to Lefebvre’s definition that environment regulates social experience, and vice versa, attitudes towards racism and colonialism are regulated by the spatial design of an exhibition.

Secondly, Hemer and Dundon indicate that in the intersection of senses, emotions and spaces, emotions have the capacity to be more than just evoked. Emotions can also be

⁸⁵ Richard Stevenson, “The Forgotten Sense: Using Olfaction in a Museum Context: A Neuroscience Perspectives,” in *The Multisensory Museum: Cross Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory and Space* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014).

⁸⁶ Stephan R. Arnott and Claude Alain, “A Brain Guide to Sound Galleries,” in *The Multisensory Museum: Cross Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory and Space* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014)

⁸⁷ Tony Bennett, “Civic laboratories: Museums, cultural objecthood and the governance of the social,” *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 5 (2005): 521–547.

⁸⁸ Alison Dundon and Susan R. Hemer, “Ethnographic intersections: Emotions, senses and spaces”, in *Emotions, Sense, Spaces: Ethnographic Engagements and Intersections* (University of Adelaide Press, 2016): 4.

⁸⁹ Dundon and Hermer, “Ethnographic,” 5.

constrained or transformed.⁹⁰ If emotions can transform, then there is room to change attitudes towards histories of colonialism, disrupting assumed Western and Eurocentric narratives. Aptly noted by Divya Tolia- Kelly, the museum space is a “theatre of pain” for indigenous people who often feel loss, guilt, sadness, and anger.⁹¹ It reminds us that not all visitors experience the museum exhibition in the same way. It indicates how emotions in decolonisation are powerful forces that mould encounters with heritage, producing counter-narratives and develop self-determined accounts of cultural heritage.⁹²

In each of these volumes, the senses are intrinsically linked to how we feel and experience an exhibition. They hint at ways the senses can manipulate our perceived reactions to content and narrative, further emphasising how design is vitally important in fostering layers of interpretation and reflection within the ecosystem. I believe that if museums wish to decolonise, they must first break away from the authoritative use of vision as the primary way of experiencing the exhibition space. Not only because it typifies a colonial rational of viewing the museum, but also because the other senses are instrumental in fostering an emotional response to an exhibition. I turn first to the use of sound in orchestrating emotional responses to the exhibition *Ons Land*.

SOUNDSCAPES

Sound in the museum encapsulates many different design techniques. These techniques create soundscapes for very different purposes. Two types of soundscapes are sound showers and audio devices. Sound showers offer an isolated audio at specific parts of an exhibition, often targeting one or two visitors. Audio devices are common features of the exhibition now, offering more in depth and specific information for visitors that text can provide.

Ons Land uses sound showers to emphasis the theme of a particular room. Sound showers are tricky design features to use successfully, as the nature of sound often means that it bleeds into other spaces, obscuring the intent of a specific sound in a particular space.⁹³ However, when the spatiality of the room is considered as an ecosystem of the senses, sound can become a particularly powerful element of an exhibition. For example, in *Ons Land*, the third room explores the theme *The Journey* made by many Indonesians after the Second World War to the

⁹⁰ Ibid., 6.

⁹¹ Tolia-Kelly, “Feeling”.

⁹² Ibid.,

⁹³ Karin Bijsterveld, “Ears-on Exhibitions: Sound in the History Museum,” *The Public Historian* 37, no.4 (November, 2015): 73-90. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/tph.2015.37.4.73>.

Netherlands. Leidelmeijer, Timmer and Meijer explained how this room is designed to represent a dreamy atmosphere of an in-between space that many of these people felt as they moved countries (fig 11). To reinforce this vision, there is also the sound of waves crashing gently, and sea birds squawking overhead as the visitor walks through. The sound fills the whole of the room which, as Timmer pointed out, is extremely small. However, the design agency (also Kossmanndejong) adapted it to make visitors feeling like they were in a huge space, indicative of an expansive ocean and endless sky.⁹⁴ The sound whisks the visitor into the journey of many Indonesians, giving visitors the opportunity to experience it themselves. In doing so, *Ons Land* instructs the visitor to empathise with an experience that is not their own. I believe *Ons Land* to be an important exhibition because it understands the significance of connecting to lived experiences. Designing a space that facilitates meaning (in this case empathy) on an affective level challenge the well-established use of vision to foster empathetic experiences.

⁹⁴ Petra Timmer and Max Meijer, TiMe Amsterdam, interviewed by Elizabeth Davis on 25th April 2024.



Figure 11. *The Journey*, Room 3 in *Ons Land*. Museum Sophiahof, The Hague.

This is further indicated by the fact that Museum Sophiahof has very little collection, an increasingly common characteristic of museums.⁹⁵ Instead, *Ons Land* is built entirely around the oral histories of eight families. The exhibition uses visitor's capacity to listen as the main way to inform. Leidelmeijer powerfully evokes that this is a positive and rewarding

⁹⁵ Levent and Pascual- Leone, "Introduction," p. xiii.

characteristic of Museum Sophiahof: “We are not limited by objects...we are free from the chains of collection”, a testament to what it means to be a museum. In our discussion of the use of audio guides as the primary tool of information telling, Leidelmeijer insists that: “A lot of people are not focussed on reading. They want to feel it”.⁹⁶ First person stories, as told by the actual people they concern, are powerful generators of emotion, precisely because they are *personal*, but also because of auditory signals such as inflection and tone that allow people to hear the emotional ramifications of the story, connecting listeners to the story on a deeper, biological level.⁹⁷

In *Ons Land*, hearing is prioritised as the sense through which most visitors experience the exhibition. Sound connects spaces to each other, fundamental to the fostering of empathy.⁹⁸ It amplifies how the thinking self cannot be detached from the feeling self, and both enter the museum.⁹⁹ Therefore, I once again assert the importance of throwing off the “chains of collection” in the exhibition space, instead promoting design that actively encourages the visitor to feel to think. Audio guides lead the way in encouraging feeling as oral testimonies are power purveyors of truth against official histories. Moreover, soundscapes are the most decisive features for designers to fully transition a space into an environment that regulates social experience, because of its biological implications in the human body and psychology. *Ons Land* is felt, not viewed.

SMELLING SPACES

The use of olfaction in the exhibition space is also important in destabilising the authority of vision. Exhibition design that incorporates smell is often food-based, though there is a surge in creating “city smells” of past societies to transport visitors back in time.¹⁰⁰

The sense of smell is used in *The Great Indonesian Exhibition* in a space that represents a literal “step in Indonesia”. The visitor encounters four bowls containing spices that gently impress upon the visitors’ olfactory senses (Fig 13 and 14). Indicated by Kleiterp, the last room was intended to be a space where the visitor is removed from the setting of the church so that people could experience what it means to be Indonesian in the Netherlands (Fig 12). In doing

⁹⁶ Leidelmeijer, interviewed by Elizabeth Davis on 24th April 2024.

⁹⁷ Stephan R. Arnott and Claude Alain, “A Brain Guide to Sound Galleries”, in *The Multisensory Museum: Cross Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory and Space* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014)

⁹⁸ Salome Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (Bloomsbury, 2010).

⁹⁹ Norris and Tisdale, “Developing,” 100.

¹⁰⁰ Bijsterveld, “Ears-on Exhibitions”.

so, the spices transform the space into a dynamic and engaging area that touches on the visitor's sense of smell, as well as vision.

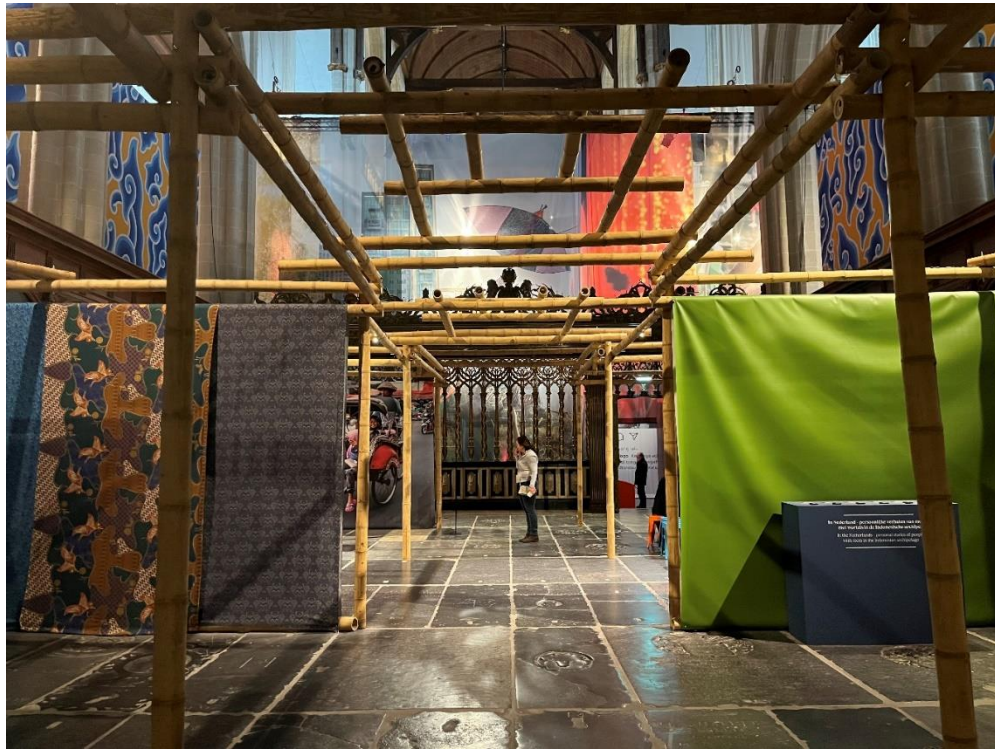


Figure 12. Reflection room in *The Great Indonesian Exhibition*. De Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam.

Stevenson argues that the most advantageous contribution of olfaction in the museum exhibition is its capacity to make the visitor feel as if they are there.¹⁰¹ The use of smell attempts to create a more authentic depiction of Indonesia. Often in exhibition design, there are stereotypical images or features that confine postcolonial countries to a set of reductive characteristics.¹⁰² For example the British Museum's exhibition *Age of Enlightenment* does not forcefully enough distinguish itself away from Enlightenment modes of thinking that produced racial hierarchies and colonial attitudes. The room is designed like an Enlightenment study, perpetuating the idea of a civilised Western culture that founded rational and scientific thinking (fig. 15).

However, when interviewed about *Ons Land*, Timmer actively stated that in the design they didn't want to include generalised features of Indonesia that everybody recognises, such as the sewing technique, batik.¹⁰³ In a similar manner, designers of *The Great Indonesian Exhibition* introduced a sensory room to signify a deeper appreciation of Indonesian history

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 163.

¹⁰² Tolia- Kelly, "Feeling".

¹⁰³ Petra Timmer, interviewed by Elizabeth Davis on 25th April 2024.

and culture. This is done through the emotional connection that olfaction has to core memories held in the psyche. Such memories enable visitors to form a link with Indonesian culture and cuisine. It indicates how using the senses, such as smell, can create cross cultural encounters.¹⁰⁴ While fostering cross cultural encounters through olfaction has merits, I am cautious not to exaggerate the use of memories in fostering empathy. There is a risk of homogenising Indonesian culture and cuisine to a list of easily identifiable spices. Thus, creating the kind of generalisation that Timmer is cautious of in *Ons Land*.

That said, the incorporation of smell is vital for the destabilising of vision as the authoritative sense to receive information and knowledge. Kleiterp acknowledges how this room breaks rhythm with the rest of the exhibition in terms of content and design style, but also in terms of which senses are prioritised, as the rest of the exhibition is primarily observed through reading and seeing. Contrastingly, in the last room visitors are encouraged to *do* instead. They can sit on a bike, open recipe books containing Dutch-Indonesian recipes, write their thoughts on a sticky note, and smell the spices. Vision is, of course, fundamental to an exhibition as it is the primary means by which most abled-bodied people see an exhibition, yet it should not be the *only* fundamental sense. I argue that by understanding how human experience is generated in the exhibition space (as Leidelmeijer does in asserting that visitors want to feel, not read) exhibitions are more readily equipped to channel those experiences into empathetic and educational responses to content and narrative. For example, Kleiterp suggests that viewing the spices used in the cookbooks is an important for visitors to understand Indonesian cuisine, evidenced to the by the many photos that people took of recipes. However, I suggest that it is the smell of spices that opens a window for an emotional connection to be made, and the authority of vision to be diminished. Unlike sound or vision, odour cues directly act upon us, literally making us have an emotional or even physical display of illness, disgust, fear, or happiness etc.¹⁰⁵ The connection is grounded in feeling rather than information dumping or object centred learning.

¹⁰⁴ Witcomb, "Toward".

¹⁰⁵ Stevenson, "The Forgotten Sense," 155.

Figure 14. Spice bowl in *The Great Indonesian Exhibition*. De Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam.



Figure 13. Spice in reflection room, *The Great Indonesian Exhibition*. De Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam.



Figure 15. Enlightenment Exhibition. The British Museum, London.

In this chapter, I have discussed how *Ons Land* and *The Great Indonesian Exhibition* have incorporated sound and smell into the exhibition design. Using the senses can help challenge Western modes of knowledge production precisely because of the emotional qualities that means Indonesian history and culture is not only observed, but also connected with.

However, the use of sound and smell in the exhibition are not without their shortcomings. In new museology, there is an infernal gap between the theoretical foundations of how using the senses is supposed to work, to what is observed and felt in reality. Of course, no two visitors feel and experience the same thing, but there are clear design choices that are unconvincing to all visitor experiences, that has consequences to how the exhibition is emotionally received.

For example, in *Ons Land*, the addition of the sound showers in the third room loses its effect slightly because of its reliance on audio guides as the central feature of information receiving. The visitor is preoccupied listening to the audio guide, so the sounds of the sea become irrelevant. To appreciate the sound, the visitor must take a step back from the audio. Therefore, the sound showers lose their sensorial function, and the visitor is momentarily pulled away from the stories that they are in the process of connecting with. The visitor's capability to be transported across the ocean alongside the migrants is affected, and with this their empathetic journey too. On one hand, *Ons Land* uplifts hearing as the central feature of the exhibition, but at times does so to the detriment of other sounds features.

The Great Indonesian Exhibition similarly acknowledges the importance of the senses. However, the potential of using smell to generate an emotional understanding is hindered by the seemingly “add-on” position of the reflection room at the end of the exhibition. *The Great Indonesian Exhibition* is a vast exhibition, and I find that by the end visitors may be weary from all the previous information. The exhibition design has not let go of using information and object centred learning as much is needed to fully appreciate the sensorial reflection room at the end.

That is not to say that the use of sound or smell in these exhibitions fails to generate the emotional responses that theoretical museology has ascribed them, but I believe that there is a disjuncture in what museum scholars and professionals wish for the senses, and how they are received. Much in the same way that Tony Bennett describes how people of the nineteenth century learnt how to view exhibition space, audiences now must learn how to *feel* an exhibition. It is an unfamiliar feeling as in Western museums, we are used to comprehending information through reading and vision. Museums need to incorporate the senses in a ‘readable’ way that does not alienate audiences. It is not a fact I am cynical about, but I believe it is one that needs addressing because as much as the use of the senses can promote empathic and critical responses to colonial histories, curators and designers must understand that not everyone else is disclosed to this fact. If the museum does not acknowledge the role of the senses in transforming the exhibition space into an emotional landscape, it remains detached from current new museological trends, remaining a stagnant institution, out of touch with society and its place in history.

Discussion

This study has indicated how exhibition design can promote decolonisation in the museum. In each chapter, I have spotlighted specific design features from the exhibitions *Ons Land, Our Colonial Inheritance* and *The Great Indonesian Exhibition*. Using evidence from these three exhibitions combined with a series of interviews with museum professionals, I have found that synographical design features are imperative to the decolonisation of the museum. In fact, failure to understand how interpretive, reflective and empathic environments can be created using space prevents the museum from shedding its colonial foundations, instead reinforcing its position in society as a neocolonial institution. Wider conclusions can be drawn by situating my explorations in Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1974).

WIDER CONCLUSIONS

This study posits a new analytical and methodological framework that situates new museological definitions of space into broader discussion of decolonisation in the museum. Informing all my analysis and interview research was Lefebvre's definition of space as outlined in Chapter One. Lefebvre argued in *The Production of Space* (1974) that every form of social organisation produces a space that reflects the organisation's social role.¹⁰⁶ His assertion is reflected in all the museological theorists in this study, beginning with Bennett who argued that spatial display in the nineteenth century museum perpetuated evolutionary narratives that hyperbolised the civil and rational West, while reducing colonised countries as barbaric and exotic.¹⁰⁷ Through similar analysis of the floorplan for *Our Colonial Inheritance* and synographical analysis, I determined how Kossmandjong created an interpretive environment by dismantling the authoritative colonial interior of the Wereldmuseum into a multi-perspective space. Sandell also promotes Lefebvre's assertion as he asserts that the museum's social role is linked to how it creates spaces of equality. While I would prefer Sandell to provide a definition of what he means by equality, the value of *pluralistic* spaces he outlines is evidenced in the success of *Our Colonial Inheritance* in dismantling the inherent colonial qualities of the building's architecture.

¹⁰⁶ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.

¹⁰⁷ Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*.

Wider decolonial discourses around museums often recognises the inherent coloniality of language, objects and narrative.¹⁰⁸ Yet decolonisation has yet to notice how or why discourses of coloniality have filtered into the museum through the exhibition space. For example, the debate regarding the Elgin Marbles currently on display at the British Museum revolves around issues of restitution and narrative, not about how the lighting, material, sounds, spatial organisation and choice of colours have also supported a narrative of British superiority. Therefore, the field of decolonial studies in the museums needs to recognise the agency of space as an important feature of what makes a museum- it otherwise risks decolonising at unequal rates.

Pluralistic spaces are evidenced in all the exhibitions I have analysed, indicating that all the exhibition designers and curators acknowledge space as an active feature of meaning making. However, Hiller and Tzortzi's application of integration levels is rejected despite spatial syntax analysis being fundamental to my methodological approach, and in the field of new museology. Understanding how spaces can fragment into smaller spaces involves reading space like a work of literature, using phrases like interpretation, juxtaposition and symbolism. However, I find the application of literary jargon onto space slightly baffling insofar as the point of synographical exhibition design is to install a feeling into visitors that is "beyond words". It is a small tension, but one I think important to highlight, because it contradicts the affective nature of exhibition design.¹⁰⁹ If new museology is to assert the importance of affective experiences, maybe there needs to be new ways of expressing such experiences that do not rely on dusty post-structuralist deconstructions of language analysis. What other frameworks can new museology borrow to make its point about the affective potential of exhibition design? If it truly aiming to move away from the authority of language and objects, maybe it needs to think in other terms, like images, emotions, artistic representations, to describe an affective space.

As museums decolonise, affective experiences are pivotal in changing how knowledge is reproduced in the museum setting, as it generates empathy and positive educational responses. Witcomb's theory must also be understood in the wider framework provided by Lefebvre, who states that space is defined by more than just a physicality, but also its sensorial and performative features.¹¹⁰ *Ons Land* and *The Great Indonesian Exhibition* evidence how incorporating smell and sound into the exhibition space added depth, spurring the visitor to feel

¹⁰⁸ Vincenzo, Padiglione, "Let the Silent History Be Told: Museums Turn to Narratives." *Fractal: Revista de Psicologia* 28, no. 2 (2016): 181-186. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1984-0292/2037>.

¹⁰⁹ Witcomb, "Toward".

¹¹⁰ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.

rather than observe the exhibition.¹¹¹ Not doing so reinforces the neocolonial qualities that are inherent to museum practices. Exhibitions that understand Bennett's theory that vision aided in the perpetuation of colonial and evolutionary narratives should be reason enough to explore other museological techniques that undermine the authority of vision in the exhibition space.

Additionally, in wider new museological practices, removing the authority of vision is also fundamental for those who are not able-bodied to experience the museum.¹¹² Implied is that in new museological and decolonial discourses, a revised understanding of the museum is needed. The new ICOM definition is testament to changes to museum practice.¹¹³ Yet I believe it does not recognise clearly enough that changing a museum's definition does not change surrounding discourses, which are still laden with imperial and colonial ideologies. The colonial inception of the museum needs to be actively remembered, so that it can be actively challenged. If the post-colonial museum is to exist, then we must first acknowledge the colonial museum.

The agency of exhibition space is tied to how knowledge is produced. As David Howes indicates, getting visitors to feel an exhibition is important to deconstruct authoritative Western modes of knowledge by reflecting on how and why information is presented in such a way.¹¹⁴ Classic post-colonial scholarship from theorists such as Aníbal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo, Gurinder K. Bhamra and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak remain ever more authoritative about epistemological decolonisation, in which the museum plays a prominent role.¹¹⁵ Yet there is little debate surrounding how post-colonial challenges to knowledge production are to appear in the digital realm. A feature that most academic subjects and debates need to catch up on, the new spatial realm that digitalisation introduces into the museum requires exhibition designers to think about incorporating multimedia technologies into the exhibition space can aid in decolonisation.

It reflects Lefebvre's wider assertions about space; that it is a once a product and perpetrator of societal values.¹¹⁶ As the digital age expands, so does its influence in the museum space, and so too does the museum space have influence on societal values. The edited volume *Museum Experience Design* typifies this duality of space by contextualising all analysis from the point of view that the museum space is now forever digital. Therefore, how we produce and

¹¹¹ Levent and Pascual- Leone, *The Multisensory Museum: Cross Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory and Space*, p. xx.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, xx

¹¹³ Bruno Brulon Soares, "Decolonising the Museum? Community Experiences in the Periphery of the ICOM Museum Definition," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 64, no. 3 (June 2021): 439-455.

¹¹⁴ David Howes, "The Secret of Aesthetics Lie in the Conjugation of the Sense," in *The Multisensory Museum: Cross Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory and Space* edited by Nina Levert (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014): 285-299.

¹¹⁵ Whittington, "Decolonising the Museum".

¹¹⁶ Merrifield, *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction*.

receive knowledge has invariably changed. New museology has opened even more affective realms that it has when it was first incepted, making the museum a more dynamic, engaging, and reflective space. Therefore, exploring decolonisation in the museum is tantamount to museological practices. As I have exhibition in this study, one approach cannot succeed without the other.

There is a tension in approaching the decolonisation of museum from a new museological perspective, in that new museological design can fall short of museological theory. The chasm between practice and theory can have serious consequences for decolonisation in the museum. As the evidence from *Ons Land* suggests, not using sound properly can impact decolonisation as the exhibition fails to foster cross cultural encounters. Moreover, in *Our Colonial Inheritance*, the last room lacks the energy inserted into previous design. Although the circular structure indicates Black's *reflection zone*, there is a disjunct between the rooms message and the design. In the wider debate of decolonisation, as soon a narrative or discourse that promotes colonial ideology (such as the exhibition architecture of the Wereldmuseum) is not actively challenged, then old, imperial and colonial discourses inherent to the space seep back into the museum's construction of knowledge.

Yet, despite the tension between museological theory and practice, it does not overshadow the usefulness synographical design in informing decolonisation. Throughout the study, I have understood each of the design features as examples of how the exhibition space can become a more equal and interpretive environment for its visitors. The way an exhibition is constructed directly informs the equality of a space. Therefore, denying exhibition spaces the opportunity to become environments that reflect equality, multi-perspectivity and empathy, situates the museums within a neocolonial framework that continues to reinforce stagnant and apathetic behaviour towards its colonial foundation.

Neo-colonial is harsh term, but it is one I apply with good reason. Although many museums have moved away from colonial narratives in presentation of content, as well as engaging in repatriation, museums are still neocolonial institutions.¹¹⁷ Ignoring the potential and impact of the way an exhibition is constructed is also another way that museums remain neo-colonial structures, as they fail to adequately engage with the exploitative and violent epistemologies that are still perpetuated by exhibition space. In this study I asserted that exhibition design can challenge, adapt, or subvert the neo-colonial discourses surrounding the

¹¹⁷ Julia Harrison, "Museums as agencies of neocolonialism in a postmodern world," *Studies in Cultures, Organisations and Societies* 3, no. 1 (1997): 41-65.

museum, indicating the potential for future studies to combine decolonial and new museological approaches to the museum space.

MOVING BEYOND *ONS LAND, OUR COLONIAL INHERITANCE, AND THE GREAT INDONESIAN EXHIBITION*

It is not only *Ons Land, Our Colonial Inheritance*, and *The Great Indonesian Exhibition* that recognise the importance of synographical exhibition design in the decolonisation of the museum. New museological theory regarding the affective quality of space has seeped into many current exhibition designs.

For example, also in the Netherlands, I recently visited *In Brilliant Light* at the Wereldmuseum in Leiden (Fig 1). The exhibition explores how contemporary African art corresponds to postcolonial theory to challenge Western discourses surrounding what is meant by “classical” art. As the name suggests, lighting is important. A neon light guides the visitor through the exhibition, illuminating the grey, concrete walls, symbolic of an industrial warehouse (Fig 2). The clinical, industrial design ensures that the artwork is the focus for the visitor, rather than the colonial interior of the museum. Furthermore, the construction of the grey walls merges into the artwork itself (Fig. 3). It is an example of how the spatiality of the exhibition has been recognised as active and equal to the exhibition content. It challenges how Western art galleries have previously separated art and exhibition space, elevating the status of the artwork.¹¹⁸

I have also mentioned the exhibition *Berlin Global* in the Humboldt Forum, Berlin. The exhibition offers a multimedia technology and interactive immersion into the history of Berlin. It asserts a critical and interpretive exploration into how the city of Berlin has global resonances, in history and today. The exhibition corporates smell, sound and touch as the primary medium through which to explore the exhibition. It indicates that when information is presented in new, engaging ways, visitors are encouraged to reflect.¹¹⁹ The Humboldt Forum typifies how, by changing the way information is presented, the museum becomes a dynamic and adaptable space that channels important societal debates.

The Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford has been at the forefront of turbulent academic and media attention. Most noticeably since the curator, Dan Hicks, published *The Brutish Museum*

¹¹⁸ Claire Wintle, “Decolonising UK world art institutions, 1945-1980,” *On Curating* 24 (2017).

¹¹⁹ Daniel Morat, “The Telling of Many Stories: Multivocality and Pluritemporality in Berlin Global at the Humboldt Forum,” in *Museums, Narratives, and Critical Histories* edited by Kerstin Barndt, Stephan Jaeger (Walter de Gruyter, Berlin/Boston, 2024)

and the wave of anti-colonial protests in 2020. Since then, the Pitt Rivers Museums begun a process of repatriating objects to formerly colonised countries.¹²⁰ Its current exhibitions have attempted to transform the museum into an interpretive, reflective, and empathic space. One current exhibition titled “Curating for Change: Nothing Without Us” explores the history of disability through the museum’s collection. The exhibition aims to restore the place of disability in history whilst also including a co-produced gallery trail of stories from disabled people. While the exhibition space is organised according to Enlightenment-style cabinets of curiosity, there is an attempt to understand it as something not just belonging to the museum but uplifting the voices of stories from disabled people. It does not use the objects to tell the story of disability, rather it lets people tell of their experiences with accompanying objects.

In each of these exhibitions, design has been channelled to foster an affective experience. They demonstrate the wider possibilities for museums that are decolonising when new museological approaches to design are considered in the construction of an exhibition.

Each of these wider examples, combined with the three exhibitions I have used for this study, indicate the power of exhibition design. They also indicate the many debates and pitfalls in new museology and decolonisation. Understanding these two approaches under one analytical framework situates exhibition design as able to transform museum spaces into environments of change, interpretation and critical awareness.

I believe, like Hicks, Okello, Tolia Kelly, Bennett and Boast that museums are inherently colonial spaces. It is an undeniable fact that museums aided in the exploitation, dehumanisation, and othering of non-Western societies. The relentless authority over aesthetics and science in Western museums created a monopoly on knowledge production that denounced the cultural and historical value of colonised objects and customs as barbaric and uncivilised.¹²¹

However, I do not attest that the museum today cannot escape its colonial legacy. In fact, I do not think museums can or should “move on”. Museums should remain firmly aware of their involvement in the perpetuation of racist and colonial narratives. The disastrous impact of colonisation should remain firmly gripped to the museum, as an institution, a place of knowledge, and power. If the museum does not acknowledge its colonial foundation, it implies

¹²⁰ Geraldine Kendall Adams, “Oxford museums return ancestral remains to Aboriginal communities,” *Museums Association*, 5 October, 2023, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2023/10/oxford-museums-return-ancestral-remains-to-aboriginal-communities/#>.

¹²¹ John Mackenzie, *Museums and Empire: Natural history, human cultures and colonial attitudes* (Manchester University Press, 2010).

an apathic, complacent, and stagnant attitude towards change. The contemporary museum cannot afford to be motionless. By transforming the agency of spatiality, museums have the potential to redefine their own colonial inheritance, becoming movable and fluid institutions of society.

Conclusion

In this study, I have been able to fulfil my initial research question: how can design of exhibitions aid in the decolonisation of museums, and how can this move the museum past its neocolonial position in society? The conclusions I have made are drawn from synographical analysis of three exhibitions in the Netherlands: *Our Colonial Inheritance*, *Ons Land* and *The Great Indonesian Exhibition*. Combined with interviews from museum professionals, I argue that by incorporating exhibition design into the process of meaning making, museums can transform neo-colonial qualities of space into environments of interpretation, reflection and empathy.

The design agency, Kossmandejong, worked to subvert and remove the colonial interior of the Wereldmuseum. They did this by opening spaces into smaller, less linear pathways that the visitor could traverse at their own leisure. The eradication of a spatially linear narratives illuminated *Our Colonial Inheritance* as an interpretive space that fosters individual perspectives. In doing so, the Wereldmuseum succeeds in moving away from the features of the exhibition space that are inherently colonial, such as authoritative, top-down and Eurocentric approaches to knowledge production.

In *Ons Land*, multimedia technology presented the history of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia by encouraging the reader to reflect on assumed historical narratives. By using a multimedia video installation, visitors are given the chance to recover by pausing, sitting and thinking about the exhibition. Moreover, *Ons Land* provides an interesting case study about the definition of a museum, as it has no collection but relies on oral history to promote its message. The incorporation of sound evidence new museological trends that incorporate more than just vision as the primary sense to view an exhibition, while also asserting the importance of fostering empathy.

The senses are also used in *The Great Indonesian Exhibition* through the use of smell. Emotions are invaluable to the learning process. In the last room of the exhibition, a reflection space was created to shift the mainly visual and language-based exhibition. One feature of the room was four tables containing spices that are used in Indonesian cooking. As the visitor is affected by the inclusion of smell, I found that exhibitions that understand how humans interpret space through sensorial embodiment are more equipped to channel this experience into learning opportunities and empathetic responses.

RESOLVING SHORTCOMINGS

However, this study is not without its shortcomings. There are three main problems that future studies would do well to resolve. The first is only looking at three case studies in the Netherlands, which was determined by the size and time that this study could be conducted in. The problem is that the exhibitions I have studied in the Netherlands might very well be different to other countries, meaning that more nuanced conclusions could be drawn. I attempted to resolve this by incorporating my findings into a larger framework of other exhibitions in the discussion, as a window into how synographical design can dispel and transform the neo-colonial nature of museums.

The second problem is using interviews as a methodology, specifically getting access to the professionals that are most relevant to the exhibition. I found that no matter how many emails were sent or net-working events I attended, responses were few and far between. I am of course grateful to the professionals I did interview- their insight was invaluable and is the basis of my analysis. However, it is also obvious that the more insights available, the more comprehensive an analysis of the curatorial intent of the exhibition design is. I combatted this issue by using the evidence from the interviews I did conduct to its fullest capacity, using close reading analysis of their language to inform how I understood each exhibition. I also relied on the exhibitions to explain itself, as ultimately, they are the product of the curators and designers' intention.

The third problem is also related to the interviews. As it was hard to engage professionals in the first place, it was even harder to get relevant professionals specifically involved in the design of the exhibition. Wendy Snoek from Kossmanndejong was the only representative from a design agency. For the synographical features of an exhibition to be truly deconstructed, evidence must come from the designers themselves. However, I do believe there are benefits in the range of museum professionals I have interviewed, so I do not think it necessary to *only* use design agencies. In fact, I think the success of this thesis is determined by the wide range of professional perspectives I got from curators, designers and managers. It enabled me to understand how museum practice incorporates many voices in the design of an exhibition, further pluralising the exhibition space.

These problems could mostly be resolved by conducting more comprehensive studies across different countries and museum professionals. However, they do not overshadow the usefulness of the interviews that I did conduct, nor the subsequent analysis of the exhibitions. In fact, it was a help not a hindrance to deconstruct cultural and decolonial attitudes using a limited number of design features.

FURTHER STUDIES

Further research into the nexus of new museology and decoloniality need to take analysis further afield. Primarily so that conclusions can become more relevant to larger issues in the academic debate, but also to show differences and nuances in other institutions and countries. I am painfully aware that the content of all the exhibitions details Indonesian heritage and history from the perspective of how *Dutch* society can decolonise. Moving the study further field would illuminate how my conclusions hold up in museums in post-colonial countries, who operate under a different set of discourses and power dynamics.

In addition, longer time needs to be spent collecting evidence from museum professionals who have more specific roles in the construction of design. Potential new studies should explore the relationship that design companies have to museums. I briefly discussed this with Petra Timmer and Max Meijer, as they managed all the interconnected parts in the creation of *Ons Land*. It was clear to me that the relationship between design creators, stakeholders in the museum, curators, academics, and artists impacts the final product, and its success as a decolonial institution. Exploration in to how these relationships function would extend the nexus between new museological theory and decolonisation to also incorporate institutional practices.

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF NEW MUSEOLOGICAL THEORY IN DECOLONIAL PRACTICES?

The future of understanding how museums can move past their position as neo-colonial institutions rests of the complete and total understanding that space is an active feature of meaning making. Much of the onus here is on the extent to which museum professionals adopt new museological research. But it also rests on the extent to which new museological research understands the inherent coloniality of museum spaces. If the neo-colonial museum is unaccounted for, the new-museological museum cannot exist. Trends in new museology have prioritised the agency of space, yet more research needs to be done on how this space is rooted in the colonial foundation of the museum. Finally, decolonisation in the museum should move past those label and narrative changes that Hicks cautions against, using instead synographical features to promote an embodied and affective experience. If European society is going to reckon with its colonial past, decolonisation is achieved by *designing* spaces that are interpretive, reflective and empathic.

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