

## Introduction

# Curating Climate - Museums as contact zones of climate research, education and activism

BERGSVEINN ÞÓRSSON

Museums have great potential in becoming relevant actors in raising awareness and promoting climate action. While museums have historically responded to environmental concerns in various ways, it is quite clear that we are now seeing a remarkable proliferation of perspectives and approaches to the topic. Climate change is a complex phenomenon that brings forth several challenges to how museums operate. Museums are encouraged to lead by example by developing sustainable practices to lower their carbon footprint. Museums must confront their colonial legacies, their role in industrial modernization, and their complicity in excessive consumerism. Museums need to explore and establish collaborations with local communities, experts, artists, and activists to promote diverse perspectives that capture the scientific, political, cultural, and emotional implications of accelerating climate change.

Making determined efforts to deal with the climate crisis in museums, it is of significance to consider museums as platforms where multiple stakeholders come into contact. While museums have many things in common, each institution has a unique set of relations between different interests. The museum is an environment where disciplines, theoretical

approaches, practices, cultural and political interests intersect.

Looking at the intersections of stakeholders provides an opportunity to reflect on issues of authority and responsibility. It is an ongoing process of introspection for museums that can be further strengthened through convening to share ideas, experiences, and experiments. Organizing the international workshop in Oslo, the research project Curating Climate Collaboratory<sup>1</sup> wanted to create a sense of collective action by exploring the dynamic and transgressive field of the “climate museum”.

Several climate museums or climate houses have been established over the last decade, dedicated to empowering people, raising awareness of the climate crisis and inspire action. Achieving that commitment they operate in diverse ways: From specially designed exhibition spaces and buildings, like the Jockey Club Museum of Climate Change in Hong Kong and Klimahaus Bremerhaven 8° Ost, to mobile and digital museums like the Climate Museum in New York and Climate Museum UK establishing partner-ships with institutions and organizations to host exhibitions, workshops, and events (Newell 2020).

The workshop's intention was to explore the emerging field of the climate museum as a particular concept and trace the unique and interdisciplinary platforms that connect the sciences and the humanities, academic and public spheres, research, and action. While the workshop drew inspiration from Klimahuset (Climate House Oslo), the questions explored were not only relevant to climate museums specifically, but museums in general. How is it possible to curate climatic change in a museum environment and initiate dialogue across its stakeholders? How can museums become platforms where science and education, local communities, activism and entertainment, debate and tourism interact productively? Do we need new institutions, or are established museums capable of rethinking their approaches and use their resources to foster understanding and action to engage with the climate crisis? What competencies does the museum sector need to develop to engage with the multi-scalar and complex phenomenon of climate change?

In this introduction, I will present Klimahuset, the project that inspired the workshop and was present during the two days, through discussions and close proximity. With the project, the museum initiated dialogues with multiple stakeholders and different strategies that were connected to realize a specific ambition and vision. From there, I move into a broader discussion on the complexities of the diverse and mutable contact points that need to be considered when discussing museums as contact zones of climate research, education and activism.

## KLIMAHUSET

In 2017, a winner of a competition for the design of Klimahuset was publicly announced. The winning proposal "Changing patterns"

aimed to raise awareness on climate change both through its architecture and exhibition design. The competition was initiated by the University of Oslo and the Natural History Museum and was made possible with a generous donation from a Norwegian businessman (Naturhistorisk Museum 2017). From the start, the ambitious project intended to inspire action through green architecture, dissemination of evidence-based knowledge, and seeking partnership with organizations, groups, researchers and activists outside the museum. Since the opening, on the 17th June 2020, Klimahuset has been affected by the global pandemic, where the museum has had to deal with restrictions and temporarily close its doors to visitors in November. Still, after less than five months in operation, Klimahuset has had close to 19.000 visitors and organized more than 50 events (Leira & Slettemark 2021).

The building was designed by Lund Hagem Arkitekter and Atelier Oslo to be a zero-emission building where its renewable energy production compensates for the emission from construction, operation, and production of building materials. The shape of the roof optimizes solar energy production and hybrid ventilation (Futurebuilt 2020). Because of the building's design, the main exhibition space has a very high ceiling. The exhibition was the result of a collaboration between the museum staff and external exhibition designers (SixSides), with input from groups of young people and external experts on climate change.

The exhibition starts outdoors, in the Climate Garden surrounding the building, and with carved and crafted wooden poles leading to the entrance strong ties to nature are expressed. In the foyer, next to the reception, a series of photographs of people and their answer to the question "What is your favourite thing?" are presented on the wall leading to the main



*Fig. 1. The section on solutions at Klimahuset. Photo by: Courtesy of Klimahuset/Jarli & Jordan.*

exhibition area. Some of them are presented in short videos, linking their answers and values to the risks of ongoing climate change. Entering the main space, the visitors face the principal question of the exhibition: “What is your role in the fight against climate change?” (Leira & Slettemark 2021).

In the center of the exhibition area, three tall, skewed white walls display projected short films that run every eight minutes and give examples of the consequences of climate change concerning extreme weather, glacial melting, and extinction of species. This installation intends to provide a striking visual and auditory experience moving between small and large scales: “Be it the massive calving glaciers of Antarctica or the tiny insects that no longer pollinate our crops, from the painfully beautifully melting ice crystals to the massive

hurricanes and their consequences” (Gagarín 2020).

Around the installation are four sections. The first section provides up-to-date, research-based facts on Earth’s climate, covering both natural and human-induced changes. The second presents scenarios of future consequences based on increasing levels of Earth’s average temperature, from a 1.5°C increase to 6°C. The third section is focused on solutions, where the visitors can choose between a variety of suggestions to how they would contribute, or participate in different types of climate actions. Based on the visitors’ answers, a final display proposes what role they could have: the activist, the expert, the influencer, the innovator, or the team player. Here, the exhibition seeks to answer the introductory question: “What is your role

in the fight against climate change?” In the final section, named “Actions” the visitors are invited to formulate their own goals and demands, and to share them with friends, family, and colleagues (Leira & Slettemark 2021; Naturhistorisk Museum 2020).

Klimahuset also has an auditorium, a multi-purpose space, fit for workshops, performing arts, or film screenings. The auditorium is intended to be a platform for events where the museum actively seeks collaborators around the themes of climate, environment, nature and sustainability. Everyone interested in collaboration is invited to send an inquiry through their website (Naturhistorisk Museum 2020). Also Klimahuset offers school children educational programs designed with the National Curriculum and its newly implemented emphasis on the environment and sustainability in mind. The educational programs are intended for groups from kindergarten to high school and take place both inside Klimahuset and in the surrounding area of the Botanical Garden (Naturhistorisk Museum 2020a).

Through the whole process, the museum was inspired by young people, making youth (14-16 years) the main target group of the exhibition. From early on, the museum was in dialogue with the environmental movement and climate activists in Norway. During the biggest Fridays For Future school strikes in Norway, on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2019, staff from the museum photographed strikers and their posters in Oslo for an outdoor exhibition that temporarily covered the fences surrounding the construction site of Klimahuset (Naturhistorisk Museum 2019).

Klimahuset plans to become a platform for discussions and action among youth, researchers, industry, politicians, unions, artists, and activists. One example is the

newly established Klimahuset youth panel, which will give advice on exhibitions and educational programs and partly organize events (Leira & Slettemark 2021). Klimahuset is a site where different strategies of climate action come into contact. The focus on finding new partnerships will surely complement the curated combination of the evidence-based exhibition, the visual and auditory installation, the learning program for school children, and the architecture. While the dissemination of scientific information is the presiding strategy at Klimahuset, collaborating with diverse partners will hopefully lead to a proliferation of approaches to the complex issue.

### **THE CHANGING FACE OF CLIMATE ACTION**

The Fridays For Future movement's impact has been and still is significant in raising awareness of the imperative of climate action and the frustrating political and cultural inaction. What started as a school strike in front of the Swedish Parliament by climate activist Greta Thunberg has evolved into a global movement of over 14 million strikers in 212 countries (Fridays for Future 2021). The influence should not only be measured in numbers but their actions and how these global movements are changing the face of environmental and climate activism. What has been disproportionately represented by older white males, “the new champions of climate action are often depicted as young women”, leading a movement that “incorporates the energy, concerns, and tactics of a younger generation” (Boucher, Kwan, Ottoboni & McCaffrey 2021: 2).

With young climate activists demanding to be heard, museums focusing their resources on climate understanding and action are turning their attention to young people and

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their enthusiasm and disquiet (Newell 2020). Museums For Future initiative appeared quickly after the school strikes gained momentum, supporting the demonstrations, issuing their declaration, and promoting ten simple actions for museums in over eighteen different languages (Museums For Future 2020). Museums responding to the call of a younger generation reveals how the institutions can deliberately shape their role in society. Realizing the societal role of museums is an ongoing process that operates on the intersection of local and global concerns. It is a process that intricately weaves together local knowledges and experiences, scientific expertise, and diverse communication strategies.

Curating climatic change in a museum environment is a dynamic process, the contact points of diverse stakeholders and strategies are mutable and will continue to change and be challenged. The changing face of climate activism in the last two years is influencing change. Research on climate communication is providing new insights and better understanding. Furthermore, with more museums committing to tackle the climate crisis, questions about their implication and contribution to the crisis have been raised. The changing dynamics can be traced back to the early 90s when the question of how to raise awareness on climate change started to take hold in the museum sector.

## EMOTIONS AND EXPERTISE

One of the earliest examples of a museum's exhibition on climate change is the American Museum of Natural History's exhibition *Global Warming: Understanding the Forecast* that opened in 1992. The lead curators Eva Zelig and Stephanie L. Pfirman (1993) explained

that the exhibition was made following the heightened awareness and discussions about global warming following the hot, dry summer of 1988. Based on evaluations on visitors' conception of global warming the exhibition's goal was to explain the science, how humans influenced the global climate system, along with studies of past climates and predictions of future climate change. The exhibition also focused on individual choices and what action visitors could take (Zelig & Pfirman, 1993).

While scientists have known about how human activity influences the planet's climate systems for a good while already, the late 80s and early 90s was a defining moment for climate awareness. Climate change entered the agenda for the "Earth Summit" in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, resulting in establishing the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) two years later. In 1988, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was established. The panel's role was to review all aspects and impacts of climate change to provide recommendations for intergovernmental decision-making drawing from scientific findings. Early climate communication was focused on explaining the science, implying that increased understanding would enable people and decision-makers to more accurately interpret complex scientific information that would, ideally, lead to better decision making. (U. S. Department of State 2002).

In *Curating the Future: Museums, Communities and Climate Change* the editors Jennifer Newell, Libby Robin and Kirsten Wehner (2017) remark that the pace of exhibitions dealing with climate change picked up alongside discussions on the topic in the public domain from the 2000s, with the focus on explaining the science behind the phenomenon. More recently, they claim, as climate change has

become a familiar topic among the public, museums have been innovative in their approach. They are “becoming more willing to explore the current and future implications of climate change for human societies”, through creative perspectives, investigating affective aspects and approaching local audiences (Newell, Robin & Wehner 2017: 7).

Research on climate change communication for the past decade has consistently revealed that “throwing more and more facts about the problem at people is extremely unlikely to shift minds and hearts in any appreciable way.” Instead, it is important to “incorporate what we now know about the psychological and social factors that shape individuals’ engagement with this issue” (Markowitz & Guckian 2020: 36).

Two articles in this publication take on the task of incorporating psychological and sociopolitical factors to shift minds and inspire action. The article “Museums as Agents and Settings for Climate Hope” by Sarah Sutton explores the prospect and importance of museums recognizing climate emotions, feelings of grief, and despair to turn them into a sense of hope and action. Her thoughtful reflections tread new territory for museums, where competencies of understanding or dealing with psychological factors might not be present. She proposes a set of pathways for partnering and providing experiences in a museum environment to treat climate grief and despair.

In the article “Weaving Strands of Knowledge: Learning about Environmental Change in the Bhutan Himalayas” Sameer Honwad, Andrew D. Coppens, Greg DeFrancis, Marcos Stafne & Shivaraj Bhattarai describe a project that takes into consideration community-based knowledge on an equal footing with scientific knowledge. The project enabled collaboration through a shared vision, where multiple

perspectives among experts and community members came together.

## **AUTHORITY AND RESPONSIBILITY**

Sharing authority and having meaningful conversations with their local communities is a matter of learning from others, listening and acknowledging lived experiences. It might be a difficult lesson for museums to learn, but it helps institutions realize their social role and take more responsibility for how their activities shape their visitors affectively and personally (McGhie 2019; Newell 2020). Robert Janes (2009) identifies this as one of the self-inflicted challenges that hinder museums in realizing their responsibilities as a social institution. This is what he calls “unsuitable hierarchy” that hinders collaboration, sharing of authority, and therefore, proper community engagement.

Janes identifies another self-inflicted challenge in “the fallacy of authoritative neutrality”, an assumption where museum organizations believe that taking a stand risks labeling them as biased or political. The problem with claiming an objective stand is that it often involves some interests for stakeholders or ends up supporting the status quo. Instead of aspiring to the impossible task of “neutrality”, museum need to take risks in the face of conflicting interests favoring the communities they serve and to include a wide diversity of publics (Janes 2009; Evans, Nicolaisen, Tougaard & Achiam 2020).

Focus on the politics of representation has revealed how museums, as colonial enterprises, have constructed histories of communities favoring dominant social groups. The analyses have contributed to claims of empowerment of minority groups and indigenous communities in museum work (Message & Witcomb 2015).

Colin Sterling and Rodney Harrison (2020) argue that climate change interventions in museums are not only about sustainability, recycling and zero-emission goals. Radical climate action “means a historical reckoning with the role museums have played in supporting the main drivers of climate breakdown – not least colonialism, capitalism (at least as we currently know it), and industrial modernity.”

Two articles in this publication reflect on the authority and responsibility of museums in times of climate crisis. The article “Curating Soya: Trying, Testing and Tasting (for) a Sustainable Museum” by Magdalena Puchberger and Nina Szogs reviews the authors’ experience managing a soya project at the Volkskundemuseum Vienna placing the production of soya, its transport and consumption in a global context of the climate crisis. Through the clever, multifaceted approach to soya, they investigate global mechanisms that contribute to human-induced climate change. Furthermore, they reflect on the museum’s legacy and implication in the global mechanisms, through revealing the societal, political and ideological discourses present in the museum.

What gets in the way of incorporating social factors into climate change when it is about global mechanisms? Is it the “fallacy of authoritative neutrality” that hinders reflections on the complicity of museums in modern society? The article “Rethinking museum shops in the context of the climate crisis” by Jamie Larkin asks a pressing question about museum shops and the position of museums in material and commodity culture. He proposes a reconceptualization of the museum shop to be more in line with climate change interventions. There is potential to think about climate communication and

action holistically that incorporates a critique of global mechanisms.

### **COMPLEXITY AND COLLECTIVE ACTION**

The four articles in this publication dive into diverse ways of “curating climate” with complex implications. Museologist Fiona Cameron (2011) argues that the implications of climate change vary from society to society, disproportionately affecting nations and communities, and human and nonhuman socialities. She contends that climate change means different things to different people in different locations. For museums to engage with the challenge of climate change, they need to consider this complexity when trying to promote understanding of, and action on, climate change (Cameron 2011; Cameron & Hodge 2015). This wide range of stakeholders makes museums interesting platforms for multiple actors to meet and negotiate, collaborate or clash. Museums are complex institutions, as sites where different disciplines, theoretical approaches, practices, cultural and political interests intersect.

Despite the complexity, the museum sector, both practitioners and museologists, generally recognize museums as important spaces for climate communication and action. Numbering in the tens of thousands there are seemingly endless opportunities for collaboration, mediation and exchange of experiences. Museums are trusted institutions and can provide safe spaces for exploration, whether to connect to the local community, the natural world or cultivate creative solutions (Cameron & Hodge 2015; Newell, Robin & Wehner 2017; Newell 2020; Sutton 2020). What is needed is “the will to direct them effectively and constructively towards climate action” (McGhie 2019: 27).

In the last few years, the participation and contribution of museums to an improved, more holistic approach to climate communication and action has increased significantly. Several museums have embraced the concept of the Anthropocene as a framework to address the overarching question of human impact on the planet (Dorfman, Koster & Nyambe 2018; Þórrsson 2020). There is also an increased will to create a sense of collective action, or even promote international initiatives to guide climate change interventions further. The year 2019 has been especially active. In September 2019 at the ICOM triennial conference in Kyoto, a resolution on sustainability and the implementation of Agenda 2030 was overwhelmingly supported by its members. The main point of the resolution was that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a beneficial framework for museums, museum workers and museum networks. Henry McGhie (2020) argues that museums benefit significantly by following global agendas such as the SDGs. They provide a shared language and have been implemented widely on a state and commercial level. The Bremerhaven Declaration on the Role of Museum in Addressing the Climate Crisis even emphasized the value of the SDGs further (Klimahaus Bremerhaven 2020).

During the planning process of the Curating Climate workshop, the organizers received overwhelming feedback to the call for contributions. Within a month from late October 2019 to late November 2019, five events connecting museums and heritage to climate change, sustainability and the future were organised in Europe: On the 24<sup>th</sup> of October, the launching of the *Climate Heritage Network* took place in Glasgow, a support network of arts, culture and heritage organisations committed to aiding their

communities in tackling climate change (Climate Heritage Network 2021). On the 27<sup>th</sup> of October, the FORMS forum for future-oriented museums and institutions was hosted by *Museum of Tomorrow International (MOTI)* in Amsterdam (MOTI 2021). The day after, the Curating Climate Workshop started in Oslo. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of November, the 27<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the *Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO)* started, focusing on the network's advocacy work on museums and sustainability. (NEMO 2021). On the 21<sup>st</sup> of November, *We Are Museums*, a community of change-makers in the museum sector, launched their pilot event "Museums facing Extinction" in Berlin, a series of workshops aimed at creating solution-oriented actions for cultural institutions (We Are Museums 2021).

COVID-19 has slowed things down in terms of coordination, collaboration, and gathering in person. The global pandemic has hit the museum sector very hard, but many are still determined to keep the momentum going. I hope that this special issue will be a welcome contribution to the ongoing effort to improve understanding of the important, and diverse role museums can play in promoting climate understanding and action.

## NOTES

1. The Curating Climate Collaboratory is part of the Oslo School of Environmental Humanities (OSEH) at the University of Oslo (UiO). The collaboratory's key participants are Dominik Collet, Prof. Climate History at the Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History, UiO; Brita Brenna, Prof. Museology at the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, UiO; Torkjell Leira, project coordinator for Klimahuset the Climate House at the Natural



History Museum in Oslo; Morien Rees, Varanger Museum and chair of ICOM's working group on Sustainability; Bergsveinn Þórsson, postdoc in CoFUTURES at the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, UiO. The collaboratory is funded by OSEH. The Curating Climate workshop was hosted by the Natural History Museum in Oslo and received additional funding from UiO: Energy and HEI: Heritage Experience Initiative.

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- Bergsveinn Þórsson, Ph.D.  
Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, University of Oslo  
[bergsveinn.thorsson@ikos.uio.no](mailto:bergsveinn.thorsson@ikos.uio.no)