

CREATIVE EXCHANGES BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE: THE CASE OF MONA (THE MUSEUM OF OLD AND NEW ART) AND THE CITY OF HOBART

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Resumo

Olendáriopoderatribuidoao'BilbaoEffect'demonstra não só a influência de museus de arte contemporânea na cidade de hoje mas também a nova dinâmica entre instituições públicas e privadas. Esta comunicação partilha os resultados de um project financiado pelo Conselho Australiano de Pesquisa (Australian Research Council) que analisou os efeitos do Museu de Arte Nova e Antiga (MONA) na cidade de Hobart, na Tasmânia, Austrália. Inicialmente uma iniciativa privada, MONA constitui um óptimo exemplo do que Terry Smith refere como o 'new exhibitionary complex' em que interesses públicos e privados não estão em competição uns com os outros mas colaboram numa relação reconfigurada através de novas e complexas formas de câmbio e colaboração. Esta contribuição explora não só como os destinos de cidades modernas estão altamente dependentes destas relações mas também como estes destinos estão organizados à volta de uma nova ecónomia nos mundos da arte contemporânea e de lugares em rede.

Abstract

The mythic narrative of the Bilbao Effect suggests not merely the potential of new contemporary art museums but also new working arrangements between public and private institutions of the city. This paper reports on a major Australian Research Council funded project that investigated the dramatic impact that MONA has had on the city of Hobart, Tasmania. Beginning as a largely private initiative MONA is provides an excellent example of the new exhibitionary complex in which public and private no longer vie for cultural authority but are necessarily reconfigured into new forms of exchange and collaboration. This paper shows not only how the fortunes of cities are increasingly dependent on this, but also highly structured by a new political economy of contemporary art worlds and their places.

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Regeneração urbana dirigida por artes; Intercâmbio público-privado e colaboração; Museus de arte; Museu de arte velha e nova, Austrália.

KEY WORDS

Arts-led urban regeneration; public-private exchange and collaboration; art museums; Museum of Old and New Art, Australia.

Introduction

If a city wants to make it into Lonely Planet's 'Best Places in the World Top 20', it helps if they had been on one of the many previous 'Seven Wonders of the World' lists, an idea that dates back to ancient Greek travel guides first produced for the Hellenic world's new travelling public in the 5th century BC (Perrottet 2004; Clayton and Price 2004). The 2015 Lonely Planet Top Twenty included eleven regular *Wonders*, including The Colosseum, The Great Wall of China, The Aya Sofya, Machu Picchu, The Taj Mahal, Petra, The Great Barrier Reef, the Iguazu Falls and the Grand Canyon. In fact, it was a list completely dominated by ancient monument places and places of outstanding natural beauty, the British Museum (built 1759) being by far the most modern. However, one was brand new. Improbably, it was a new museum of art built in a poor suburb (ranked in the top decile of social disadvantage), on an island state off the south coast of Australia, just one stop from Antarctica. It was MONA, the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, and it came in at number 20.

Two years earlier, Lonely Planet (2013) had ranked Hobart the 7th best city in the world and in doing so it lionised MONA, citing it as the main catalyst for Hobart's extraordinary cultural florescence. 'Harbour town becomes hip' was the byeline for this transformation of place. Hitherto, according to the Lonely Planet story, Hobart had been a 'sleepy harbour town' that had attracted a solid 'outdoorsy' set to its pristine natural wilderness and coastline. Hobart was also a former industrial town and like all former industrial towns it had becoming increasingly reliant on tourism. Yet in 2010, a year before MONA was built, the state was worried about declining tourism numbers.

We can of course make light of such rankings, but what is real in its apprehension will be real in its consequences. And Lonely Planet is not inconsequential in the direction of global human leisure traffic. In the first year following its 2013 listing, overseas visitors to Hobart increased by 22%, and not solely from its traditional European and North American visitor base: Chinese visitors increased by 18% and Indian visitors by 38%. Since MONA opened in 2011 it attracted between 318,000 - 354,000 visitors per year. Initially, 40% of its visitors had travelled from interstate or overseas, but this rose to 70% by 2015. It is notable that few other museums of contemporary art have such high tourism numbers, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao being an obvious comparator here (Author names deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process). In the late nineteenth century Frank Cook (son of Thomas Cook) intended to impress his creative father with a scheme to bring the Indian Raj to the English summers of Hobart during their hot season (Morris 1974). This did not transpire but where he failed, David Walsh, MONA's owner, may yet succeed in bringing Asia a cool change.

Once their historical and cultural heritage had been fully developed thought the 1970s and 1990s, former industrial cities increasingly looked to developing their cultural economy as a primary catalyst. The trouble with the culture industries is directly related to their defining quality: they are *risky* businesses. Vast sums are spent producing new songs, novels, films, video games, television shows in the knowledge that most

will fail and everything depends on a tiny proportion of hits. In the same way, cities that seek to grow their culture industries in the hope that visitors will travel to see them have entertained rather naïve hopes based on the arrival of overly simplistic cultural policy formulae (O'Connor, 2010; Olive 2012; Pratt 2011). In the area of tourism-orientated art museum and festival development, we have witnessed an era of cultural policy transfer on an epic scale that has produced repetition and jaded travelling publics rather more than florescent cultural cities (Richards and Wilson 2006; Richards 2015).

The potential for culture industries and creative cities to rise phoenix-like from the ashes of manufacturing industry, and to reoccupy and transform its disused precincts, was first noticed in places like Camden Lock, London; Toronto; New York; and Barcelona, but it was at Bilbao, and with Frank Gehry's design for the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao where the special impact that an art gallery can make was first noticed. Opened in 1997, it has pulled in around one million visitors a year ever since. The proceeds of such flows of tourism was significant in building further rounds of cultural, design, technical and industrial investments. Like all Holy Grails this catalytic process, often referred to as the Bilbao Effect, has proved to be elusive. Apart from a few exceptions, most of these massive investments joined a litany of flops and failures. Not that this has stopped more and more cities from trying to replicate it. Since 2000 Bilbao has hosted an average of 58 delegations per year from cities and states all keen to understand how to pull off a similar effect (Gonzalez 2011). This 'policy transfer tourism' has been a lucrative new industry in itself for Bilbao but it is not at all clear that it has worked for their guests.

Notable among new museums that fail are: the Sheffield National Museum of Popular Music, UK, which collapsed within the first year, the Santiago Calatrava's new wing at the Milwaukee Art Museum and the KIASMA Helsinki Museum of Contemporary Art, both of which failed to inspire anywhere near anticipated visitor numbers. The Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art in Biloxi, Mississippi failed to generate sufficient public support to make it a going concern. Indeed, even a Frank Gehry design commissioned by a wealthy private collector was no guarantee that a new museum would work. Described [by Erica E. Barnett] in 2004 as 'EMPTy', visitor numbers almost halved in the first three years of *Experience Music Project (EMP)*, a Gehry designed museum built by Microsoft founder and billionaire Paul Allen, in Seattle. In the same period it cut its workforce from 500 to 200. So, the significance of MONA can therefore be measured against the *rarity* of the Bilbao Effect.

Yet MONA was not part of civic regeneration strategy for Hobart in the same way the GMB clearly was for Bilbao (Plaza and Haarich 2013) and so cannot be subsumed under a Bilbao Effect, and for the same reason, it cannot be described as a 'Hobart Effect'. So far it has been referred to as the MONA Effect. MONA is one of a new generation of private collector galleries which have been opening not only in the heartlands of the Western art world but in its nether regions and in nations where contemporary art and contemporary art galleries were hitherto unheard of. At the same time, they have remained largely under the radar of cultural economy writers for whom private museums often conjure the image of neoliberalism, privatisation, development and gentrification adding unwanted commercial pressures of public galleries to compete on the

open market. There are no doubt examples of this yet the emerging evidence for them is far more mixed and in some cases pointing the other way: some, perhaps like MONA are making a better case for better funded public-style art galleries, and showing that art publics and a new enlarged art tourism public can deliver both urban regeneration and cultural florescence. In the case of MONA we can also see that it might be a mistake to see private in competition with public institutions. This paper suggests that the MONA Effect is properly the result of an historically unique but replicable partnership between the two.

The New Private Art Galleries 2000-present

After some decades of learning to juggle the conflicting demands of marketization, cultural economy and expanded art publics, conventional public art museums and not-for-profits have recently found themselves in competition with the very mavens of private enterprise, who as enthusiastic art collectors themselves are now building their own art museums and foundations where once they were, along with governments, the main source of support for the public museums (Bennett 1988, 1995; Wu 2002; Hutter and Throsby 2008; Franklin 2011; Smith 2013; Gnyp, 2015). Their arrival has been sudden, swift and significant: there are now 317 (with active, living collector-founders), 70% of them were built after 2000 and many more are anticipated (Adam 2014; Larry's List 2016; Deloitte 2014). Together they signal the leading edge of a dramatic change in the public exhibition – and experience – of art, variously described as changing or collapsing the boundaries between the non-profit and private sectors (Bechtler and Imhof 2014; Gnyp 2015; Harris 2016; Kennicott 2016). They have opened museums of contemporary art in many more countries and regions where once there were none, resulting from a massive global expansion of private contemporary art collecting (Larry's List 2016; Franklin 2014).

There is also great variation in the collecting/curating/exhibition strategies of these private collectors. Many private initiatives are modelled on conventional public museums (The White Rabbit, Sydney; The Long, Shanghai); others embody the more critical and radical stance of the not-for profit art spaces (MONA, Tasmania; DRAC, London); while other owners in collaboration with artists use their collections to become overt shapers/manipulators of taste, art markets and cities (The Saatchi Collection, London; The Broad, LA). At another extreme the public museum model is being reconfigured as 'art depots' and 'warehouse' concepts, as new private enterprises, in collaboration with city authorities, tap into the expanding sources of art in private collections to combine publically funded storage and professional services (much in demand) in exchange for rights to exhibit to the public. The Public Art Depot which opens at the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam in 2018, claims that for the first time, anywhere in the world, a major museum's entire art collection (not just a tiny fraction of it) will always be on display to the public. Such exchanges are occurring worldwide (Kennicott 2016; Harris 2016; Bechtler and Imhof 2014).

A new age of private art museums dazzles with architecture, seductive new locations and novel exhibitionary platforms – acquiring, in many cases, a new kind of charismatic standing, as art-makers and art

world makers as much as exhibitors (Maak 2011; Smith 2012; Walker 2015; Franklin 2014; A Harris 2013). Often awash with acquisition and exhibition funds yet virtually free of the burdens of public responsibility and accountability, they are widely perceived as deeply problematic (Hatton and Walker 2000; A Harris 2013; Miles 2013): they vie for sovereignty over cultural authority, they threaten to undermine the capacity of public art museums to deliver on their core responsibilities (especially in the field of contemporary art) (Schuker 2008), and they deepen the marketization (and manipulation) of all relationships within the art world and with art publics (Ellis 2008; Smith 2009). In the USA, the tax sheltering antics of some, like Peter Brand, are public scandals.

The visual arts have always been generated in a complex set of exchanges between private and public values, between artists, critics, patrons, collectors, disseminators, and publics – its cultural-political dimensions richly covered conceptually by the ‘exhibitionary complex’ (Bennett 1995; Hutter and Throsby 2008; Wu 2002). Yet today we face a situation in which the world’s richest private collectors get richer, while the publicly financed museums and artspace are, by and large, becoming poorer. Until very recently, in many countries, private collectors made up some of that shortfall. Now, they increasingly want to do it their way, and on their terms. This has led to a perceived change in the balance of relationships within the art world, one which Marta Gnyp (2015) has recently referred to as ‘The Shift’.

Yet, the extent to which their arrival and net impact opposes public principles and values, or merely reshuffles the public-private dimensions of the historic exhibitionary complex, is not yet clear (Smith 2013; Franklin 2014). It is also a crisis that has prompted new alliances, collaborations, experiments and emergent models in which private and public enter into new forms of exchange and partnership.

Aims

This paper aims to draw on a case study of MONA in the cultural ecology of Hobart and Tasmania, and in particular how it has been involved in three kinds of new exchange and the impacts they have had:

1. Combining its collection with those of other local museums in order to create new exhibitions.
2. Collaborating with the local city council in order to bring its art and curatorial team to activate the city with midsummer and midwinter festivals
3. Funding, sponsorship, training and inclusion of local artists, community arts and cultural entrepreneurs across the length and breadth of its operations

Before looking at these three forms of exchange it is necessary to briefly describe MONA’s aesthetic, exhibitionary and museological origins, aims and interventions.

The MONA Effect

In 1999, wealthy professional gambler David Walsh opened a museum of antiquities on his Moorilla Estate vineyard in Hobart, which, like almost every museum in the world, including the Guggenheim Bilbao, was a 'white cube'. White cube museums seek to minimise ANY interference in order to deliver a plain and clear display of every object. White walls, minimal lighting, airiness and apt labels provide a neutral space that tranquilises and disciplines human visitors to be quiet, serious and studious. Because Walsh also used his museum for ritual functions (weddings, awards nights, birthdays etc) he noticed that the function crowds responded to his collection differently. Festooned with decorations, the wine and the ritual occasions generated a festive atmosphere that tied in with the objects (many of which were ritual objects), creating engagement and interest. Whereas, during the day the white cube atmosphere seemed to numb visitors into shuffling zombies who were quietly reverential and dutifully reading the labels and not much more; hardly noticing the objects.

When Walsh began collecting modern and contemporary art and realised he needed to build a far bigger museum, he also decided that the white cube had to go. In his view white cube galleries tended to close visitor engagement down rather than connect them to its vital subject matter. He and his team decided to reverse the white cube philosophy: they were going to make his new museum buzz with emotion and create theatrical experiences akin to those of the function crowds. The lights were going to be dimmed and the noise turned up; drinking alcohol was to be encouraged and there were to be distracting labels. MONA was going to be built underground.

Critically, Walsh's team avoided making his museum an art history lesson and settled on showing art works and objects that spoke to people about their contemporary lives, especially through their own bodies. His art seemed to ask the question: why do we live like this? Contemporary ways of sex and death are fraught with anguish, fear and shame and we live with many unresolved, barely talked about problems. In the subterranean half-light of MONA people could confront these demons and give them time. At MONA our research has found that average tours are around six times longer than those in other museums. This in itself was a major innovation, a mix of theatrical forms of engagement within a transformative festive format. Edmund Capon the former Director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, said 'it has redefined the art gallery' and 'forced us to see art in a new way' (Franklin 2014). However, MONA is not just a gallery and they have brought art and emotion to the city of Hobart on an equally epic scale. We can see this through three examples.

1. Combining its collection with those of other local museums in order to create new exhibitions. MONA, TMAG and Theatre of the World (TOTW)

Theatre of the World was to have been MONA's first exhibition since it embodied all of the values and anti-museum elements it had enshrined in its museum aims. When the team chosen by Walsh to identify and scope these met at the Venice Biennale 2007 they were torn between two directions: an adventurous

unleashing of theatre and wonderment as an ordering principle for experience, in place of didacticism, or the reproduction of a more normative 'white cube' as the most suitable vehicle for the exhibition, veneration and dissemination of art knowledge in the form of art history. At the 2007 Venice Biennale they encountered *Artempo*, a collaboration between Jean-Hubert Martin (formerly Director of Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris) and others that devised an exhibitionary form to explore the subjects of art as they may be encountered not in linear time, but across the time and space of humanity, stressing commonalities of the human condition and cultural expression rather than linear 'progression'. Rather than distinguish different art eras, they collapsed time around art themes and subjects. For Jean-Hubert Martin modern art galleries had singularly failed to do this, creating instead a 'docile museum', where taxonomy and chronology were privileged above emotional and pleasurable access and where art had become a form of social distinction rather than liberation or transformation. As MONA writes: 'Theatre of the World is a kaleidoscope: here the viewer sees the object, and that is enough. This notion harkens back to the Renaissance view that art and knowledge are inextricably intertwined. This art is visual poetry.' (MONA 2016: <https://mona.net.au/museum/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/theatre-of-the-world>).

This was itself a transformative and decisive experience for the MONA team and afterwards Martin was hired by Walsh to curate an exhibition that would draw on his own collection and the vast but mostly unseen treasures of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

The task ahead of Martin was considerable, not least the access and scoping of the TMAG collection, and so TOTW became MONA's second major exhibition (June 2012- April 2013). According to Jane Stewart, a Senior Curator at TMAG, 'Each room was imbued with a 'phenomenon' or 'state' common throughout time and place, their names including 'genesis', 'scope', 'majesty', 'duet', 'phantasm'. Objects connected in various ways to these ideas were choreographed within their room in a form of visual poetry, or 'theatre''

In the eyes of Jane Stewart, this collaboration with an affluent and daring private collector museum brought 4 advantages.

First, Martin's museological emphasis on the value of art objects themselves 'challenged the perceived barrier' at TMAG that their objects required very high standards of historical research before they could be placed in the public domain. These expensive and time consuming processes prevented a large amount of its material from ever seeing the light of day and even its most exciting possessions remained unseen. As Stewart revealed:

'A bible with a bullet hole, a colonial 4 poster bed, early images by Tasmanian contemporary photographer Ruth Frost, Adelaide Ironside's colonial Dream painting, and John Dempsey's 1820s portraits of the English poor were among the many items that hadn't been exhibited for years, if at all. We had spent 10 years waiting to undertake the research for the Dempsey's before

exhibiting them as a group, supported, we had hoped, by a catalogue. TOTW didn't require this level of scholarship and so thankfully these works are now in the public sphere.'

Second, through collaborations with an individual collector and an internationally renowned curator working within global currents and circuits of acquisition and exhibition, a local municipal museum (and its public) were given unprecedented international exposure and experience. After finishing at MONA, TOTW went on tour, first and notably to La Maison Rouge, Paris, with TMAG staff giving presentations at the opening and contributing to its exhibition and marketing. La Maison Rouge, Paris, is itself a private museum which make space and funding available for exhibitions of other private and public collectors.

Third, on the back of MONA's contribution to city culture and economy, TMAG received considerable (\$30 million) funding for redevelopment and in many ways their success with TOTW just 9 months before increased the confidence of government in supporting an institution consistent with Hobart's new found reputation as an edgy art city. As Stewart observes, '...whether or not it was consciously acknowledged, our part in the 'junking of the chronological corset' (to quote the title of one of the essays in the TOTW catalogue) must have given the impression that TMAG was open to 'stepping out'.

And then fourth, we might say that TMAG's cross fertilisation with a wealthy private art museum set it on entirely new lines of flight. According to Jane Stewart they were now able to:

- nurture the new contact made with European historians, curators, and collectors
- run-with the world's response to Tasmania and it's public collection
- reach out to the influx of cultural tourists to – and media interest in – Tasmania that MONA has inspired
- remain open to a visual and museological debate about the role of public museums in today's busy and ever-connected 'theatre' of a world.

2. Re-activating the city with annual midsummer and midwinter art festivals

From the very beginning MONA was never an isolated museum on the edge of town but a vibrant presence that energised the city across its many beautiful (unused, derelict) spaces. It galvanised a festive atmosphere that had never quite kicked off before. Its first ever productions were co-productions with the city's established arts scene and government, to curate an annual midsummer music and art festival (MONA FOMAs), and following their unprecedented success these were extended into more and more activities across the year. Dark MOFO, a pagan festival of gastronomy, music and art proved that even in the dead of winter, traditionally a time of hibernation for Tasmanian tourism, the hotels could be filled and the streets full of revellers. With the City Council and many other partner organisations MONA turned Hobart into a carnival-activated city using world class, head-turning art works, music and gastronomy, daring the city to invoke the misrule associated with true carnival. It successfully occupies the social elite's beach at dawn on midwinter in order to stages a

mass nude swim, overturning numerous bye-laws and prohibitions in order to do so. Starting in 2013, Dark MOFO has since become Australia's premier mid-winter festival with approximately 280,000 visitors attending its ten-day period in 2015. In 2015 Dark MOFO produced a cash injection to the Tasmanian economy of some \$46.6 million and created the equivalent of 207 new full time jobs, adding 8,610 additional hotel bed nights at a time when hotels had been previously dormant (IPS 2015). An additional flow of 23,193 passengers passed through Hobart airport in June 2015 compared with June 2012 (Hobart Airport Statistics 2012-2015). Hobart's gastronomy industry is now thriving with a new generation of creative talent – many of whom were already in Hobart but previously struggling to make embryonic businesses succeed. MONA and the various other events it has spawned has brought a critical mass of visitors that now means they are in business all year round and not just for a problematically brief summer season.

3. Nurturing an arts ecology

MONA not only aimed to include a broader art public, to be 'art museum training wheels' as its owner put it, but also grow the cultural economy of its city and region. Summarising MONA's museum aims that were collectively arrived at in August 2007 Mark Fraser included the following aims:

- to 'facilitate improvements to cultural facilities in Tasmania';
- 'to be an educational facility for schools';
- to 'provide a creative environment for artists/writers in residence';
- 'to be patrons of contemporary arts and culture'; and
- 'to generate Government interest in community driven projects with possible funding outcomes' (notes from Mark Frazer, Museum Director of MONA, to Adrian Franklin in 2014).

MONA 'curated' a Sunday market in its own grounds, inviting selected artists and designers to start selling their own works to fund their art and design practices. Using their considerable experience across art, design and business they effectively provide mentorship so that these little start-ups can thrive there and then expand into more permanent businesses. MONA's Moorilla Estate has a permanent sound stage and provides several new platforms inside and outside the museum for new local bands. It has been a place where many refugees and new migrants have been given a start as performers. The larger festivals also need a large number of supplementary public artworks, performance works, gastronomy and music acts to play around bar areas, intervals, feasting areas and dockland spaces and local artists have an unprecedented access to exhibitionary platforms as well as national and international contacts. Indeed, their festivals and critical mass of continuous work has now attracted a huge contingent of international and national experts of stage, lighting, technical and associated expertise alongside arts practitioners. As a result, they now comprise a new aspirational gravity, pulling more and more young locals from more and more backgrounds into the cultural economy of the city as much its audiences and publics.

MONA demonstrated we should have more confidence in building art galleries in working class and other peripheral cities more often. Perhaps we should open up art to the multiplicity of subject positions it promises rather than continue to teach visitors the single truth of art as art history. Perhaps we should connect art to music more often and connect major cultural institutions like museums to the transformative festive life and potential of their cities. And perhaps entire cities need to realise that culture industries have to come from their hearts and that they have to embrace and live them first, as they have in Hobart, in order that they are properly attractive to others.

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