

How To

Make going to a Museum
a Shared Experience

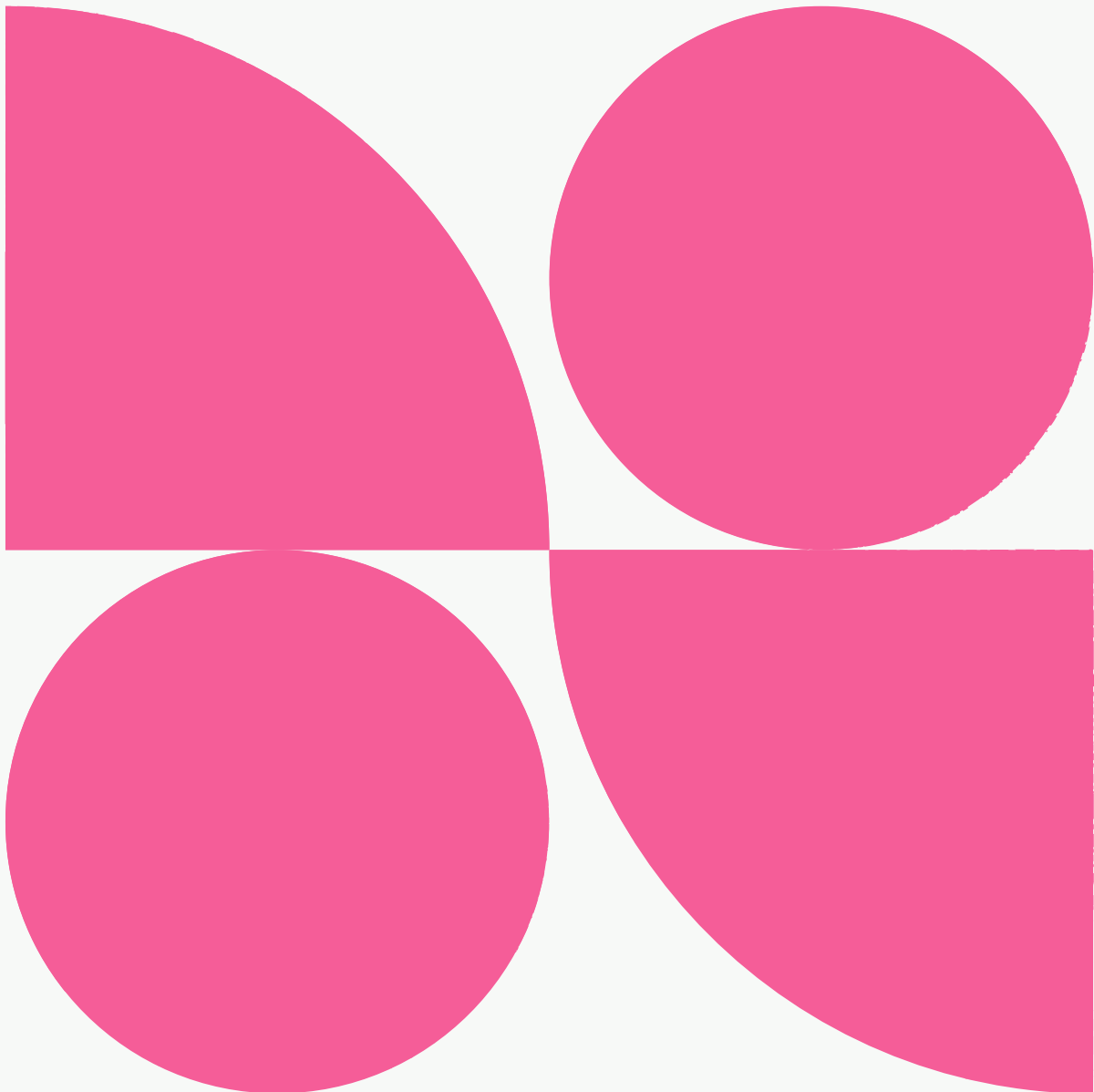


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History of Museums

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Humans love to collect things. It is our nature to group things together, the way people teach others about living in the world, even throughout multiple generations. Although not completely confirmed, the first known organization to create a museum of sorts, was 530 BCE - now referred to as Neo-Babylonian Princess Ennigaldi's collection of items which could now be considered a "museum". However scholars argue that other places would fit the idea of what is now considered a museum, an example would be the Vatican Museums traced back to 1506 or the Capitoline Museums in Rome, 1471.

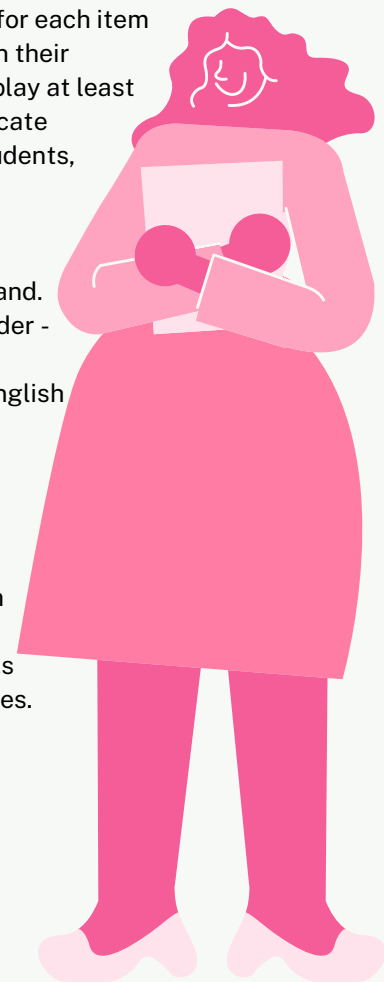
In ancient Alexandria, there was a place called "Museion" which was a university that had a library with a grand display of a variety of objects. Museums as we understand them today would come later in the 17th or 18th century Europe but the sites where to display objects such as in a public square date back to way before then.

Wunderkammern is an example of an equivalent to today's private study collections. They were cabinets that were assembled by scholars, wealthy merchants, and nobles. Wunderkammern were places where many would gather to talk about the wonders of the world and for the owners of such riches to show off their collections.

A museum is typically defined as an institution that collects, preserves, researches and interprets art and other historically significant objects for the education and enjoyment of the public. Museums contain certain features that help categorize something as a museum. Museums have grand collections of items that they care for and are responsible for preserving. They are also responsible for documenting detailed records for each item in their collection since many items are of great value. Most museums engage in research on their collection or the historical, scientific, or artistic context of many pieces. Most museums display at least some of their collections to the public through exhibitions that are curated to inspire or educate visitors. Museums are open to the public and often cater to a variety of people, including students, scholars, tourists interested in history, and the general public.

There are 4 iconic museums that are essential and have been visited by millions of people throughout thousands of years. The first is The Ashmolean Museum, located in Oxford England. When it was inaugurated in 1683, it was part of the University of Oxford's campus. The founder - Elias Ashmole - a collector, politician, astrologer, and an avid student put his collection on display for research and education purposes. His collection included art and objects from English silver to Greek Pottery to paintings by Picasso to drawings by Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci.

The second museum is also in England, this time in London. What is now described as the oldest independent museum opened in 1759, but didn't house any art for the first 50 years. Instead, it was initially like a huge library filled with manuscripts and books of all kinds from all around the world which only allowed educated men to visit and was only more accepting to the public in the 19th century. This museum is met with quite a bit of controversy due to its collection that for many years has held items that are extremely important for other countries. Countries such as Egypt have been asking the British Museum to return those items.



History of Museums

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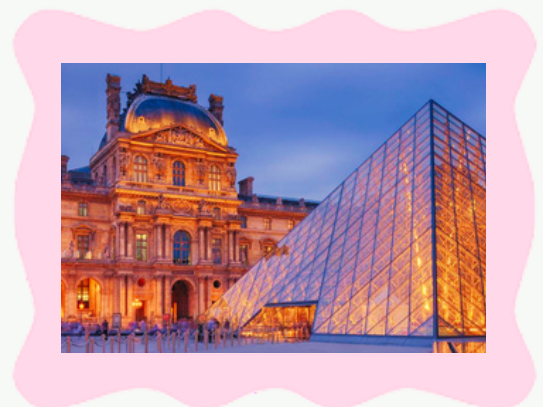
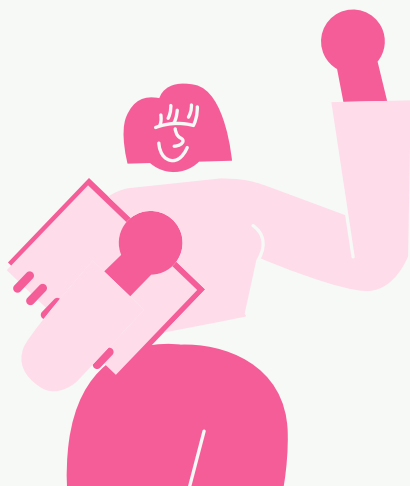
The Louvre, in Paris, began as a fortress in 1190, which then was remade into the royal palace in the 1500s. Set on the banks of the Seine River it is now internationally known and renowned for its glass Pyramid and grandness. It took the French Revolution to make it into a museum which made it a symbol for the revolution.

Lastly, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York was opened in 1872 when the many named and anonymous founders of this museum made lasting contributions to create what is now known as the Met. This is the biggest Museum in the Western world and is part of the top 3 most visited museums in the world, just behind the British Museum and the number one most visited - the Louvre.

Humans are explanatory creatures as mentioned in the book “The Design of Everyday Things” by Don Norman. We create mental models of how things work, it is important to give background and understand how things came to be to make this mental model. These models come from “whatever knowledge we have” regardless of whether the information is real or imaginary. This information is often “constructed from fragmentary evidence” which can lead to a poor experience due to the poor understanding someone may have about what is happening. Don Norman relates this to a thermostat, but if someone doesn’t understand how a museum works or how to find different things, this can also happen in museums. By making a museum a shared experience it helps limit the amount of misunderstanding that may happen.

Aren't Museums already a shared experience?

Technically Museums **can be** a shared experience.
But they are not inherently a shared experience.



What is a Shared Experience

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A shared experience refers to an event or situation where groups participate together to create a sense of connection or mutual understanding of the event. These events or situations often involve shared emotions, perceptions, or interactions with other individuals. Examples of inherently shared experiences are concerts, religious mass, cultural festivals, sport events, holidays and many more.

There are common elements to all of these experiences. Some elements of a shared experience are unifying symbols such as a cross for a religious mass or a shared demonstration of emotion such singing together at a concert. Many scholars have explored theories that shed light on the sociology of shared experiences. George Mead - a sociologist - theorized in his book "Mind, Self, and Society" that we live in a community that is created through communication, specifically through symbols and shared meanings that shape social interaction. This theory suggests that through language humans will interpret symbols which led to a shared understanding of the same experience. Similarly, Maurice Halbwachs introduced the concept of a collective memory. In his book "On Collective Memory". he highlights how memories are not always an individual experience but also can be shaped and changed by having the experience taking place in a social situation. Shared experiences contribute to the formation of memories.

Identifying some of the elements that contribute to a shared experiences is important to understand what to change and enhance to make museums a shared experience.

01

Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging is a fundamental human need and emotional experience that arises when individuals feel connected, accepted, and valued within a particular group. Abraham Maslow created a "Hierarchy of Needs" where love and belonging is extremely important, some now argue that love and belonging should be at the top of the pyramid.

02

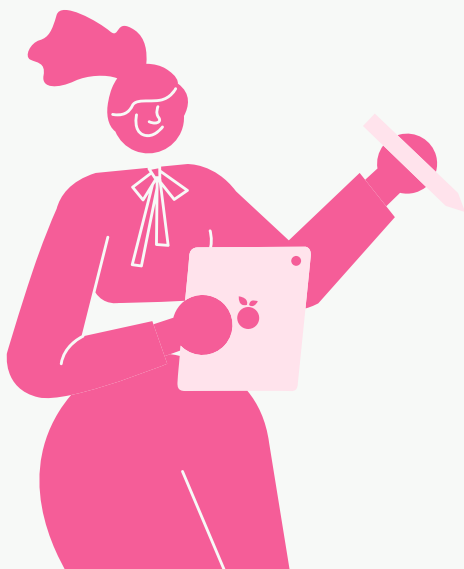
Common environment

A common environment plays a pivotal role in shaping the sense of belonging by providing shared spaces, resources, and opportunities for social interaction. The shared experiences within a common environment contribute to the development of a collective identity and a feeling of connectedness to each other.

03

Shared Recognizable Identities

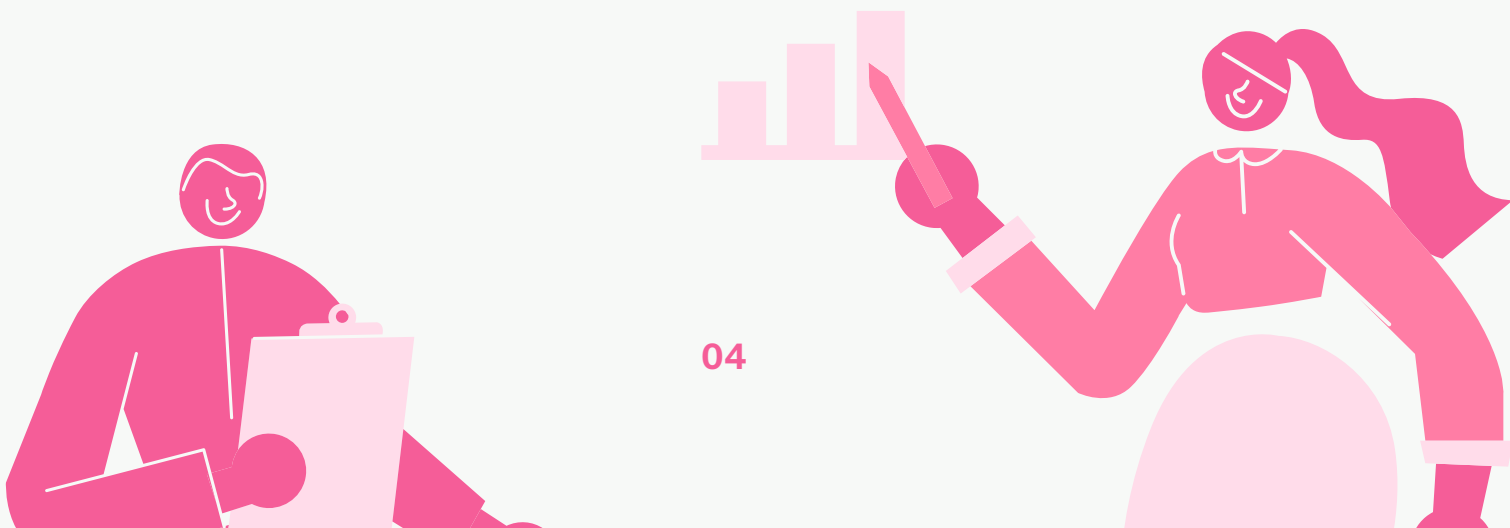
Shared recognizable identities create a foundation for a sense of belonging by fostering connections based on common characteristics, experiences, or affiliations. This could be things like identifying with a disability or a occupation, religious identity and many more.



Elements to a shared experience

Joint orientation to common feature	Shared demonstration of emotions	Unifying symbols
Shared recognizable identity/identities	Opportunities for contributions	Common goals and share accomplishment
Fulfillment of need(s)	Shared ideology and belief system	Sense of belonging and ownership
Common practices/rituals	Changes for reciprocity and giving	Common environment/location

Museums have many elements of a shared experience because they can be experienced as one. Many institutions incorporate many of these elements to enhance experiences, but here are some ways museums could incorporate some of these elements more intentionally.



Opportunities for Improvement

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Opportunity for Contributions

In order to create a better shared experience for people going to museums there could be interactive expositions where people can interact more and have a platform where visitors can share their perspectives and create opportunities for contributions.

Shared and Recognizable Identities

Creating DEI initiatives in museums can ensure that the exhibits reflect a variety of different identities and creates an inclusive space where all visitors feel represented.

Joint Orientation to a Common Feature

Museums can leverage upcoming digital technologies that allow visitors to explore common exhibits together. For example, they can create an app that asks visitors to pick their interests and what exhibitions they want to see, and the app could allow them to see other people's interests which could then become a point of conversation therefore creating a joint orientation to common features. This app could also hold discussion boards on different exhibitions and incorporate augmented reality.



What are Museums doing Right

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experience

Unifying Symbols

Museums often create a brand identity for themselves. Using symbols like a logo or a theme for an exhibition to create a shared visual language of what to expect for museum-goers.

Ex.

The MET uses its iconic logo all over making it easy to identify the brand and create expectations when visiting.



Common Environment / Location

Museums are physical spaces that provide a shared environment for visitors. The architecture, layout, and design of the museum contribute to the shared experience of exploration of the location and the specific exhibitions visited.

Present or Absent

Fulfillment of needs

Different people come to fulfill different things at a museum. Most museums fulfill the educational need to create an educational space and make sure it is currently relevant through temporary exhibitions. However many museums don't have an effective way to receive feedback or interact with the visitors which may lead to a lack of fulfillment when visiting a museum. Especially when visiting a museum alone unless the museum becomes a shared experience with strangers it is unlikely that a person would visit again.

Shared Ideology and Belief System

Museums may shy away from controversial topics related to shared ideologies because of concerns when the public reception. Mostly they are worried about backlash or potential conflicts that they may involve themselves with. Sometimes acknowledging what is currently controversial means the museum would have to "pick a side" and this could cause a negative view on their image. Some museums struggle to represent a diverse range of beliefs especially if there already is a lack of diversity among staff and directors. This means that museums have to focus on DEI and making sure that they can represent at least most of their visitors in some way.

Common goals and shared accomplishment

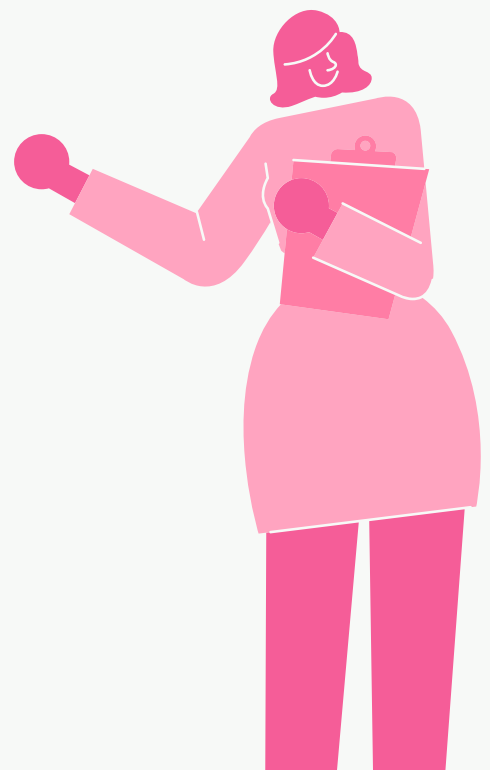
Common goals provide opportunities for active engagement, encouraging visitors to participate in museum activities beyond passive observation. Visitors that are engaged are more likely to have memorable and meaningful experiences, especially since they are shared. However, museums that are traditionally focused on curatorial roles might face challenges in shifting towards a more collaborative and community-engaged approach. Another reason why some museums may find it hard to create these common goals is because if they are not constantly interacting with their community, they may find it hard to identify what the common goals that will resonate with their visitors are. One idea of what museums could do to get their community to engage in common goals is to show how many people are walking through certain exhibitions by showing the number increasing by someone walking into the room it creates a sense of "I am part of something".

Shared Demonstration of Emotions

Most museums focus on a more traditional approach of quietly walking around the various exhibitions with little place to demonstrate much emotion or opinion. To make it a shared experience, I would suggest implementing technology. An example visitors could use their phones to add notes and their thoughts about the pieces and others could use their cameras to see what other people are saying about the same thing they are seeing. Using multisensory experiences that incorporate sound, touch, and other interactive elements can enhance emotional engagement which can create a shared demonstration of emotion.

Sense of belonging and ownership

Museums may face challenges if they are perceived as exclusive or elitist. Breaking down barriers and creating a more inclusive atmosphere is crucial for fostering a sense of belonging among diverse audiences and the communities that visitors come from. With that, museums should also make sure that they are including everyone. Physical or digital accessibility barriers can hinder the sense of belonging for individuals with disabilities or those facing socio-economic challenges. Museums need to ensure accessibility to create an inclusive environment for all.

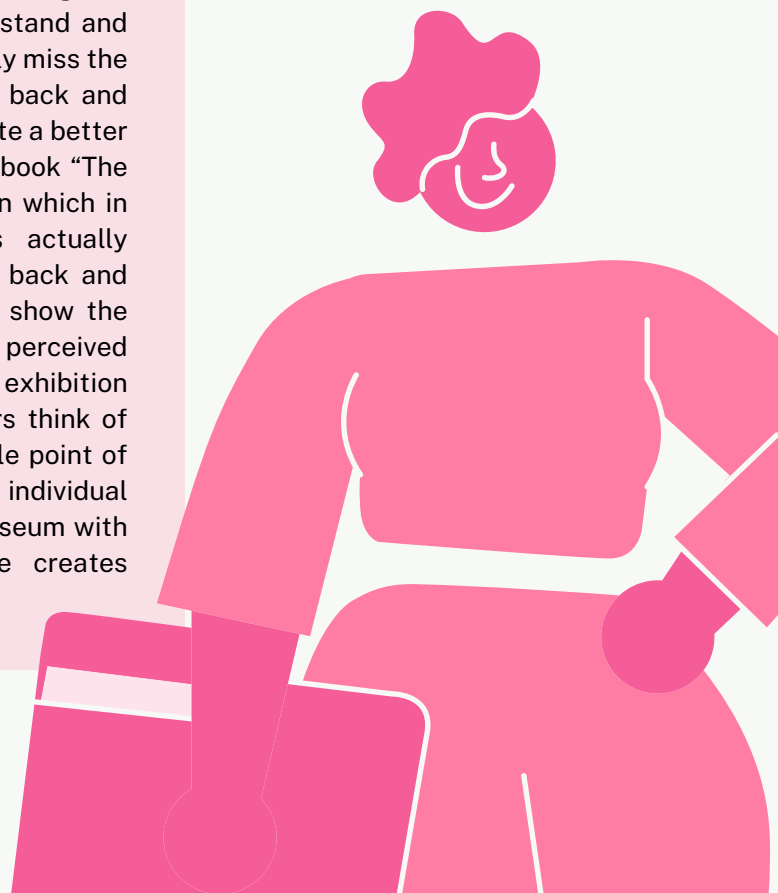


Common Practices / Rituals

Adopting and enhancing common practices and rituals can contribute to the sense of community, identity, and shared understanding within a museum. Many museums already have certain rituals such as interactive exhibits, regular exhibits, and guided tours. Creating routine also creates expectation. If the expectation is good then the museum has to keep it up and always remain relevant but if the expectation is bad they may lose visitors but if they change and listen to feedback it may have a stronger impact on the visitor since the bad expectation was changed into something better. On the other hand, museums may face challenges if there is a lack of consistency in the implementation of common practices or rituals. Inconsistency can lead to confusion among visitors and hinder the development of established routines. This could become a bigger problem if there is an absence of audience input where there is no way for visitors to provide feedback that will actually be taken into consideration when making changes. However if there is resistance to change, especially if it is a resistance to cultural change within the museum it can create a bad shared experience between visitors that may identify the same problems.

Changes for reciprocity and giving

Museums historically operated within a top-down, hierarchical model, where the institution primarily played the role of a knowledge provider. Shifting towards a reciprocal model may require a departure from traditional structures and mindsets creating space to learn from all and not just one knows all. Like mentioned in the book “The Design of Everyday Things” visitors often try hard to understand and interact with museums but oftentimes “they usually miss the point of the display”. Allowing for there to be a back and forth between the museum and the visitor can create a better environment for shared experiences. Even in the book “The Umami Strategy” it mentions the cognitive illusion which in this case is the illusion that the visitor is actually understanding what is going on. If there was a back and forth going on of reciprocity and giving it could show the museum directors how their exhibitions are being perceived which may even be valuable for the temporary exhibition artists who may be interested in what the visitors think of their art. It is also worth mentioning that the whole point of the book :The Umami Strategy is to help create an individual identity in an over saturated market. Making a museum with the purpose of it being a shared experience creates uniqueness from other museums that are stagnant.



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