

LOCATING A MUSEUM'S ROLE

By

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On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unauthorized aid on this thesis.

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## Introduction

Throughout my travels and studies, I've encountered a plethora of museums. Observing how these institutions can vary so widely but all fall under the same label of 'museum' has intrigued me. I have been chewing on how to demystify the diversity of the museum form to others. I believe this can be achieved by laying foundational knowledge of possible museum roles. Once knowledge is built, one can begin to critique institutions. Critique and analysis of museums is important as museums are meant to serve the interests of the public. Museum theory literacy can help the public engage in advocating for museums to be of their relevance which is what I hope to support by developing a pedagogic exercise. My research will mainly be in dialogue with the following influential museum theory texts: "The Museum, a Temple or the Forum" by Duncan F. Cameron<sup>1</sup> and "The Critical Museum Visitor" by Margaret Lindauer<sup>2</sup>. These texts written in 1971 and 2006 respectively, still maintain relevancy to how we think and talk about museums today. In discussing temple-like museums, I will also be incorporating ideas of Carol Duncan's 1995 comparison of the art museum to a ritual site.<sup>3</sup> With this project I aim to foster critical museum visitors by developing an accessible way to understand, examine, and locate museums' role(s) through the lens of the object-based temple and the dialogue-based forum dichotomy.

## The Museum's Role

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<sup>1</sup> Duncan F. Cameron, "The Museum, a Temple or the Forum," in *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson (Altamira Press, 2012), 48-60.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Lindauer, "The Critical Museum Visitor," in *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, ed. Janet Marstine (Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 203-225.

<sup>3</sup> Carol Duncan, "The Art Museum as Ritual," in *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, Carol Duncan (Routledge, 1995), 7-20.

Before examining the specific roles of temple and forum, it is helpful to understand the history and purpose of museums. Museums originate from a human drive to collect. Cameron puts forward that a collecting drive is evidenced by archeological findings of collections and arrangements of objects which have been recorded throughout history.<sup>4</sup> Collecting helps us understand our world and allows us to say something about ourselves. For example, art, photos, or mementos that may surround your desk are a collection that says something about who you are and what you value. A collection will reflect how the collector perceives reality.<sup>5</sup> Private collections, which were shown to those in the collector's circle, signaled things about the collector, perhaps how rich, educated, or well-traveled they were. Spaces designated to house collections of valuable objects could be said to resemble something like a temple in function in that the enshrined collection becomes a reminder and signal for values to aspire to. The idea of opening collections to the public birthed the modern museum institution. The first public museum is credited to be the Ashmolean Museum in 1683.<sup>6</sup> Collections being introduced to the public sphere still tended to be controlled and were frequented by a new academic, curatorial elite.<sup>7</sup> These curators studied collections and organized them into scientific systems of classification. Having the judgement of scholarly experts, museums' collections were seen as the objective standard of what was valuable.

Deriving from public collections came the idea of democratic museums whose collections were designated to be for the general public and the furtherance of its education, enlightenment, and recreation.<sup>8</sup> If collections are meant to be for the public, the public has a right

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<sup>4</sup> Cameron, 51.

<sup>5</sup> Cameron, 51.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Abt, "The Origins of the Public Museum," in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 115.

<sup>7</sup> Cameron, 53.

<sup>8</sup> Cameron, 52.

to scrutinize them. There are concerns that the traditional museum, one built on collections of aristocratic and bourgeois values, is not relevant to the current values and concerns of society. Dissatisfaction with museums has been expressed through anti-museum sentiments<sup>9</sup> and well-established activist groups such as the Guerilla Girls.<sup>10</sup> To follow the appeal of “this was your collection and therefore it should be meaningful to you, the visitor”<sup>11</sup> that Cameron explains, museums have come to resemble something more like a forum. Some museums have been working to incorporate multiple perspectives, especially those that have been historically marginalized. In addition, to engage communities, museums are hosting more activities and events in their spaces acting in a similar way to community centers.

One can argue circles around what a museum is and what its role should be. Even the International Council of Museums’ definition for ‘museum’, which is arguably the most methodologically devised definition, tries to cram many functions and responsibilities into the label:

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mathieu Copeland and Balthazar Lovay, *The Anti-Museum: An Anthology* (Koenig Books, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Guerrilla Girls, accessed November 3, 2023, <http://www.guerillagirls.com>.

<sup>11</sup> Cameron, 53.

<sup>12</sup> “Museum Definition,” International Council of Museums, last modified August 24, 2022, <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>.

I acknowledge that there are many functions, descriptors, and similes worth exploring for the museum's role such as ritual site<sup>13</sup>, theater set<sup>14</sup>, department store<sup>15</sup>, memory institution<sup>16</sup>, etc. However, in order to simplify what may be a new field of knowledge for some, I am choosing to solely focus on the temple and forum metaphors.

### **The Temple and the Forum**

“The Museum, a Temple or the Forum” was written by Duncan F. Cameron, a Canadian museologist and former director of the Brooklyn Museum, and first published in 1971 in *Curator: The Museum Journal*. Cameron claimed that museums were suffering an identity crisis, unable to define their role.<sup>17</sup> Les Harrison summarizes this essay in his examination of 19<sup>th</sup> century American museums, stating that Cameron “uses the terms temple and forum to describe two competing functions of the museum in a democracy.”<sup>18</sup> I will be exaggerating the dichotomy of these two terms, temple and forum, as opposite ideals of the role museums should play.

Cameron suggests that some museums are temple-like in function.<sup>19</sup> The term ‘temple’ is used to describe a place traditionally designated for religious and/or spiritual worship. A temple can be described as a space of liminality which Carol Duncan summarizes as a place “in which individuals can step back from the practical concerns and social relations of everyday life and look at themselves and their world – or at some aspect of it – with different thoughts and

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<sup>13</sup> Duncan, 7-20.

<sup>14</sup> Philip Rhys Adams, “Towards a Strategy of Presentation,” in *Museum*, (1954), 1-7.

<sup>15</sup> John Cotton Dana, “The Gloom of the Museum,” in *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson (Altamira Press, 2012), 29.

<sup>16</sup> Elaine Heumann Gurian, “Savings Bank for the Soul: About Institutions of Memory and Congregant Spaces,” in *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson (Altamira Press, 2012), 135-143.

<sup>17</sup> Cameron, 48.

<sup>18</sup> Les Harrison, “Preface: Barnum’s Ghost,” in *The Temple and the Forum: The American Museum and Cultural Authority in Hawthorne, Melville, Stowe, and Whitman*, Les Harrison (The University of Alabama Press, 2007), xiii.

<sup>19</sup> Cameron, 53.

feelings.”<sup>20</sup> Some functions of temples may include enshrining objects, reaffirming established values, and providing private space for reflection and spiritual contemplation. Temple-like museums are aligned with a historic role that Ann Chinnery summarizes in an examination of the etymology of ‘museum’ as: “temples of the muses, places for reverence and contemplation of art and cultural objects.”<sup>21</sup> Not only temple-like in function, some museums have even been deliberately designed to imitate Greco-Roman temples such as The British Museum with its triangular pediment and large columns. Cameron re-enforces this comparison of museum to temple by explaining: “those segments of society with the power to do so ... enshrined those things they held to be significant and valuable.”<sup>22</sup> Following the enshrining of objects, the collections of temple-like museums will play a primary role in the function of the museum. It is argued that encountering objects first-hand is an educational opportunity that museums uniquely provide.<sup>23</sup> The objects that a museum enshrines also serve to reaffirm established values by being representations of dominant culture. It is acknowledged that many historic museum collections have problematic histories of being sourced as trophies of colonial conquest. Returning to functions, temple-like museums provide private space for reflection of objects which is achieved through interior design. Many museum galleries have been intentionally designed to encourage aesthetic reflection which is done through increasing the amount of empty wall space between works, bringing works nearer to eye level, and individual lighting of pieces.<sup>24</sup> Duncan explains this phenomenon: “the more “aesthetic” the installations – the fewer the objects and the emptier the surrounding walls – the more sacralized the museum space.”<sup>25</sup> Duncan also believes that

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<sup>20</sup> Duncan, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Ann Chinnery, “Temple or Forum? On New Museology and Education for Social Change,” *Philosophy of Education* (2012), 270.

<sup>22</sup> Cameron, 53.

<sup>23</sup> Chinnery, 269-276.

<sup>24</sup> Duncan, 17.

<sup>25</sup> Duncan, 17.



some museums have been designed to promote a state of liminality much like a ritual site in that they will tend to be a marked off space from everyday life where one is expected to behave with certain decorum inside.<sup>26</sup> To summarize this comparison of temple to museum, Harrison explains: “in Cameron’s formulation, the museum as temple is culture at its highest, an altar where visitors come to worship timeless works of enduring value.”<sup>27</sup>

To counteract the potential problems of temple-like museums, Cameron proposes another role for museums – forum.<sup>28</sup> The term ‘forum’ is used to describe a place for people to gather, exchange ideas, or engage in discourse and debate. Some functions of forums may include supporting the production of new thoughts and confronting established values by not being afraid of the radical or controversial. Chinnery brings up another etymological history of ‘museum’, stating that “during Roman times, ... the Latin term *museum* was used primarily to refer to places for philosophical discussion.”<sup>29</sup> Forum-like museums will have collections play a secondary role in which objects are used to support the narratives of exhibits. Harrison describes the different use of objects by the temple and the forum as following: “whereas the temple seeks to protect significant and valuable items from the pressures of the marketplace, the forum relies on the commercial circulation of objects and ideas in order to fulfill its functions of experimentation, confrontation, and debate.”<sup>30</sup> There are arguments that museums may not require collections at all.<sup>31</sup> Some museums, such as the Aspen Art Museum, for example, are specifically non-collecting.<sup>32</sup> To fulfill the function of supporting the production of new

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<sup>26</sup> Duncan, 7-20.

<sup>27</sup> Harrison, xiii.

<sup>28</sup> Cameron, 55.

<sup>29</sup> Chinnery, 270.

<sup>30</sup> Harrison, xiv.

<sup>31</sup> Steven Conn, “Do Museums Still Need Objects?” in *Do Museums Still Need Objects?*, Steven Conn (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 20-57.

<sup>32</sup> “About,” Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, CO, accessed November 3, 2024, <http://aspenartmuseum.org/about>.

thoughts, many forum-like museums offer educational programs, workshops, and talks to the public – under the criteria of ‘public programming’. These can be found in calendars of events on the websites of many museums and across social media. To fulfill the function of confronting established values, forum-like museums will aim to incorporate multiple perspectives without bias to counter cultural hegemonies. For an example of this, one can look at the 2023 exhibit “It’s Pablo-matic” curated by comedian, Hannah Gadsby, at the Brooklyn Museum.<sup>33</sup> This exhibit prodded at the problematic aspects of Pablo Picasso, who is often hailed in art history canon. This exhibit was controversial and met with passionate reviews, some critiques being that it was gimmicky and lacking in scholarship.<sup>34</sup> Though a forum-like approach may be met with pushback, Cameron argues that the value of forums was the creation of a space in which new and challenging perceptions of reality could be seen and heard by all to encourage innovation and change in society.<sup>35</sup>

Though “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum” was first published over fifty years ago now, I believe museums are still struggling to find their identity and define the role(s) they hope to fulfill. We find ourselves in a time of both temple-like *and* forum-like museums. However, Cameron argued that the temple and the forum should be distinctly *separate* forms. He suggests that if a museum tries to fulfill both roles, they risk potentially confusing the public.<sup>36</sup> For example, if a museum collects both things of high value and experimental work a visitor would begin to question the museum’s ability to collect things with a standard of excellence.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> “It’s Pablo-matic: Picasso According to Hannah Gadsby,” Brooklyn Museum, New York City, NY, accessed November 3, 2024,

[https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/its\\_pablo\\_matic\\_picasso\\_according\\_to\\_hannah\\_gadsby](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/its_pablo_matic_picasso_according_to_hannah_gadsby).

<sup>34</sup> Robin Pogrebin, “Hannah Gadsby’s Picasso Show Was Meant to Ignite Debate. And It Did.” *New York Times*, June 9, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/09/arts/design/hannah-gadsby-picasso-brooklyn-museum-debate.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Cameron, 59.

<sup>36</sup> Cameron, 56-57.

<sup>37</sup> Cameron, 56-57.

However, Cameron does admit both roles of temple and forum are needed to be fulfilled by institutions in our society in some way.<sup>38</sup> I will not engage in debate as to whether museums can *effectively* fulfill both temple and forum roles within a singular institution. But I think it is worthwhile to evaluate how institutions can both elicit temple-like and forum-like cues to investigate the identity crisis that Cameron warns of.

### **Museum Critique**

Despite varying in role, all museums have a certain responsibility towards society. Cameron argues that this responsibility is to create an equality of cultural opportunity by not solely pandering to an audience of the elite and to serve as an objective model while including new work that does challenge perceptions of reality.<sup>39</sup> Museums hold a lot of power in society and current ideology as Duncan explains: “to control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths.”<sup>40</sup> When a museum’s work is not aligned with the values or identity of the community there can be obvious friction. As Duncan continues: “what we see and do not see in art museums – and on what terms and by whose authority we do or do not see it – is closely linked to larger questions about who constitutes the community and who defines its identity.”<sup>41</sup> There are discussions of reinventing museums<sup>42</sup> or implementing new museum theory<sup>43</sup> in order to reconsider the museum and to right wrongs arising from an institutional structure rooted in colonialism and power. Strategies as

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<sup>38</sup> Cameron, 59.

<sup>39</sup> Cameron, 59.

<sup>40</sup> Duncan, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Duncan, 8-9.

<sup>42</sup> Gail Anderson, “A Framework: Reinventing the Museum,” in *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson (Altamira Press, 2012), 1-9.

<sup>43</sup> Janet Marstine, “Introduction,” in *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, ed. Janet Marstine (Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 1-36.

to how to do this have been laid out by museum theorists such as Amy Lonetree in her book, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* published in 2012.<sup>44</sup> Other strategies include incorporating communities in the curating process such as the Clifford Still Museum's exhibit, "You Select: A Community-Curated Exhibition".<sup>45</sup> Cameron also emphasizes that museums be honest and transparent about knowledge gaps.<sup>46</sup> An example of how this can be done is the Brooklyn Museum's introductory panel to their "Arts of Asia" installation which states: "These displays tell stories from numerous cultures, but there are many others that could have been told. ... This remains a work in progress."<sup>47</sup> However, these institutional changes can be slow to implement. Museums do have financial concerns and so will tend to be risk averse to maintain their economic survival.<sup>48</sup> Museum reform needs to be encouraged with external pressure which is what Margaret Lindauer advocates in her influential essay, "The Critical Museum Visitor" from 2006. In it, Lindauer states that museums envision an ideal visitor when developing exhibits. An ideal visitor is one that feels comfortable culturally and ideologically with the information presented by the museum.<sup>49</sup> Pulling from Duncan, the ideal visitor could be described as one best prepared to perform a museum's ritual by reading the museum's cues. Museum cues can be described as the museum's stage and script that are set up through intentional curation and design.<sup>50</sup> A visitor who is able to spot the cues of the museum and see them for what they really are, is not the ideal visitor. Instead, they are a new

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<sup>44</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

<sup>45</sup> "You Select: A Community-Curated Exhibition," Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO, accessed November 9, 2023, <https://clyffordstillmuseum.org/exhibitions/you-select-a-community-curated-exhibition/#:~:text=In%20the%20final%20exhibition%20celebrating,being%20part%20of%20a%20community.>

<sup>46</sup> Cameron, 54.

<sup>47</sup> "Arts of Asia," Brooklyn Museum, New York City, NY, accessed October 13, 2023.

<sup>48</sup> Lindauer, 223.

<sup>49</sup> Lindauer, 204.

<sup>50</sup> Duncan, 12.

type of museum visitor that Lindauer proposes and wants to foster – the critical visitor. Which Lindauer explains, is a visitor who “studies how the visual, written, and spatial features of an exhibition collectively implicate an ideal visitor.”<sup>51</sup> In “The Critical Museum Visitor”, Lindauer lays out different aspects of museums a critical visitor should examine closely which include museum architecture, display style, and written texts and unspoken messages as summarized in Fig. 1. Observations from these queries can be turned into a critique. Lindauer guides the reader through her process of creating an exhibition critique by examining the 2003 temporary exhibit “A Revolution in the Making: The Pottery of Maria and Juan Martinez” at the Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona. Lindauer argues that museums are market driven; they have economic concerns and so they’ll tend to be risk averse.<sup>52</sup> Which means change relies on audience demand. Through informed critique, critical museum visitors can become agents of change.<sup>53</sup> By fostering critical museum visitors, we can ensure that museums are held accountable to be beneficial to our communities.

### **The Project – The Museum’s Role Locator**

To help others engage with these theories and practice being a critical museum visitor, I have developed an exercise I am coining, “The Museum’s Role Locator”. This exercise can be of personal use or as a class activity. Handouts for this exercise include instructions (Fig. 3), Evaluation Criteria (Fig. 4), and the Locator Diagram (Fig. 5). This exercise will result in the placement of one to ten museums on a range from temple to forum. Where the museum lands should reveal whether a museum elicits more temple-like or more forum-like cues. Post-exercise

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<sup>51</sup> Lindauer, 204.

<sup>52</sup> Lindauer, 223.

<sup>53</sup> Lindauer, 223.

discussion questions are included in the instructions to help users reflect on the results. This project is not claiming to be an objective scientific tool to evaluate museums, rather it is meant to be an educational tool to help others engage in museum theory discourse.

The Evaluation Criteria (Fig. 4) is a list of statements that are either temple-like cues or forum-like cues. The statement will either be applicable or non-applicable and should be able to be answered through research of the museum's website and in-person observation in combination. Some of the evaluation statements will require subjective judgement. If a statement is not applicable to a museum, that will not affect the museum's leaning. In developing the criteria, I listed my reasoning for cues and organized the statements into categories of mission, display, objects, didactics, and visitor experience as seen in Fig. 2. There are not an equal representation of both temple and forum statements in each category as I believe some categories have different levels of importance for each role. For example, 'objects' plays an important function for temple-like museums but is less relevant to forum-like museums. There are an equal number of criteria statements for both temple-like and forum-like cues. This is so if a museum demonstrates an equal number of temple-like *and* forum-like cues, that can be demonstrated in the final location of the museum. There are six statements corresponding to each role, totaling twelve evaluation criteria statements.

The Locator Diagram (Fig. 5) is to be used in combination with the Evaluation Criteria. The diagram has 'TEMPLE' on the far left of the x-axis and 'FORUM' on the far right. This placement is arbitrary. All institutions will start at the center point of the x-axis, labeled 'START'. Each side of center consists of six vertical lines which correspond to the six possible statements per role. If a statement is applicable, the museum will be moved one space along the x-axis in the direction listed. If a statement is not applicable, the museum will not be moved at

all. The horizontal lines are guiding lines to assist in not cluttering the diagram if one is to compare multiple museums. They allow the user to compare up to ten museums at once and do not indicate anything about the museum's role.

### *Institution Test*

To test The Museum's Role Locator exercise, I practiced locating the role of ten museums. These are institutions that I have previously examined using Lindauer's critical museum visitor techniques during an independent research project I conducted in the summer of 2023. These museums are located throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland. The list of museums evaluated is as follows:

- **The British Museum – London, UK**  
“The British Museum is unique in bringing together under one roof the cultures of the world, spanning continents and oceans.”<sup>54</sup>
- **Science Museum – London, UK**  
“The Science Museum's world-class collection forms an enduring record of scientific, technological and medical advancement from across the globe.”<sup>55</sup>
- **Tate Modern – London, UK**  
“See some of the world's most exciting modern and contemporary art at Tate Modern. Enjoy innovative works that shaped art as we know it.”<sup>56</sup>
- **Victoria & Albert Museum – London, UK**  
“The V&A is the world's leading museum of art and design, housing a permanent collection of over 2.8 million objects, books and archives that span over 5,000 years of human creativity.”<sup>57</sup>
- **Pitt Rivers Museum – Oxford, UK**

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<sup>54</sup> British Museum, London, UK, accessed November 10, 2023, <https://www.britishmuseum.org>.

<sup>55</sup> Science Museum, London, UK, accessed November 10, 2023, <https://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk>.

<sup>56</sup> Tate, London, UK, accessed November 10, 2023, <https://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern>.

<sup>57</sup> V&A Museum, London, UK, accessed November 10, 2023, <https://www.vam.ac.uk>.

“The much-loved Pitt Rivers Museum is unlike any other. Founded in 1884, it houses within an atmospheric building more than 500,000 objects, photographs and manuscripts from all over the world, and from all periods of human existence.”<sup>58</sup>

- **Ashmolean Museum – Oxford, UK**  
“The Ashmolean is the University of Oxford’s museum of art and archaeology, founded in 1683. Our world famous collections range from Egyptian mummies to contemporary art, telling human stories across cultures and across time.”<sup>59</sup>
- **Madame Tussaud’s London – London, UK**  
“Madame Tussauds London has 11 zones with different themes, home to over 150 lifelike figures from celebrities, the Royal Family to sport stars and world leaders.”<sup>60</sup>
- **The Little Museum of Dublin – Dublin, IE**  
“This award-winning museum tells the story of Dublin. Housed in a beautiful Georgian building, our collection was created by public donation.”<sup>61</sup>
- **Irish Whiskey Museum – Dublin, IE**  
“Irish whiskey is the fastest growing spirit in the world. At the Irish Whiskey Museum, we tell the true history of this famous spirit.”<sup>62</sup>
- **EPIC The Irish Emigration Museum – Dublin, IE**  
“At EPIC you’ll discover the far reaching influence of Irish history and the impact that the 10 million Irish men and women who left Ireland had on the world.”<sup>63</sup>

The results of this test can be found in in Fig. 6.

The results of the exercise did align with what I expected and what Duncan warns of – many museums elicit both temple-like and forum-like cues.<sup>64</sup> This was especially noticeable in the physical experience of moving a museum right and left as if the museum was in a tug-of-war between temple and forum. Seven of the ten institutions fell on the temple half of the x-axis and two fell on the forum side. The Science Museum elicited an equal amount of both temple-like and forum-like cues to end in the center point of the x-axis. None of the museums elicited only

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<sup>58</sup> Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, UK, accessed November 10, 2023, <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk>.

<sup>59</sup> Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, UK, accessed November 10, 2023, <https://www.ashmolean.org>.

<sup>60</sup> Madame Tussauds, London, UK, accessed November 10, 2023, <https://www.madametussauds.com/london/>.

<sup>61</sup> The Little Museum of Dublin, Dublin, IE, accessed November 10, 2023, <https://www.littlemuseum.ie>.

<sup>62</sup> Irish Whiskey Museum, Dublin, IE, accessed November 10, 2023, <https://irishwhiskeymuseum.ie>.

<sup>63</sup> EPIC The Irish Emigration Museum, Dublin, IE, accessed November 10, 2023, <https://epicchq.com>.

<sup>64</sup> Cameron, 56.



one type of cue. This is notable when thinking about whether a museum can effectively be both temple and forum-like in role. Considering identity crisis, it is notable to find the Victoria & Albert Museum located so close to temple when its mission statement is more forum-like. In their mission, they state that they hope to “enrich people’s lives by promoting research, knowledge and enjoyment of the designed world” through strategies that include deepening “the relevance of our collections to the UK creative and knowledge economy”.<sup>65</sup> This suggests a strong value towards supporting the production of new thoughts. How museums represent themselves in their mission and how they come across in actuality is a point of interest. The visualization aspect of this exercise I found to be quite helpful in brainstorming and drawing comparisons between museums. The test conjured interesting comparisons that I was not expecting such as the British Museum ending up at the same location as Madame Tussauds. Overall, I believe this exercise is an engaging way to reflect on museum experiences.

## **Conclusion**

The Museum’s Role Locator exercise is an educational tool to make museum theory more accessible and engaging. There are plenty of arguments as to what the purpose of a museum is and should be. These conversations will be ongoing. However, this project chose to take a specific look at the two proposed roles, temple and forum, laid out by Duncan F. Cameron’s iconic text from 1971. To examine whether museums may be eliciting both temple-like and forum-like cues, I developed Evaluation Criteria using critical museum visitor strategies taken from the work of Margaret Lindauer. With the Locator Diagram, users can easily visualize and compare whether museums are more temple or forum-like. This exercise can help lead to

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<sup>65</sup> V&A Museum.

larger discussions such as: what should a museum's role be, are museums having an identity crisis, and can museums effectively fulfill multiple roles within a singular institution.

Opportunities for future research include developing more accessible ways to engage in influential museum theory texts or redesigning this exercise for other ideal roles all the while being aware that museums do not exist in clear polarities. For an institution that is influential in shaping ideology and how we understand ourselves and the world, it is crucial that the public is able to understand the potential roles museums can serve in order to advocate for the community needs of a museum.

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## Critical Museum Visitor Summary

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### Before the Exhibit

- Note expectations, hopes, and assumptions
- Question what the title might suggest of the content
- Reflect on why you selected this specific exhibit

### Museum Architecture

- Consider the buildings architecture – Does it attempt to mimic another kind of institution?
- Consider the location – Is it conveniently located or more set apart from the city?
- Consider the transition into the museum - How do you feel when entering?
- Is there a contradiction between architectural style and the museum's content and mission?

### Display Style

- What objects are being presented and in what ways?
- Describe the exhibit's display style (anthropology exhibit, art exhibit, diorama, collector's den, immersive...)
- Note the design elements such as wall color, lighting, font, interactive components, and spatial relationship of objects
- How do design elements affect how you experience and travel through the exhibit?
- How do design elements affect how you think about the objects?

### Written Texts and Unspoken Messages

- Consider writing style, word choice, and theme – Does it assert factual information and exude an aura of truth? Does it pose rhetorical questions?
- Whose information or knowledge is being presented or excluded? What does it invite or dissuade from a dialogue of ideas?
- Is there a big idea? Who benefits from the big idea?
- How does it make you feel?

### Beyond the Display

- What issues and ideas are absent?
- Does it match other exhibit styles of the museum?
- Think of recommendations for the exhibit that are compatible with the museum's mission but were not included - What are obstacles the museum staff might face in trying to enact these recommendations?

Figure 1. Critical Museum Visitor Summary

## Criteria Planning

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### Mission

- **The mandate, mission, or about statement discusses the museum's collection or objects.**  
Temple – *This signals that the museum's collection plays a primary role for the museum.*
- **The museum states an estimate number of objects in their collection.**  
Temple – *This signals that the museum's collection plays a primary role as the number of objects is used to entice potential visitors.*
- **The museum supports the creation of new work (through workshops, artist-in-residence programs, community projects, or other educational experiences).**  
Forum – *This signals that the museum encourages the production of new thought.*
- **The museum is non-collecting or does not rely on collections to form exhibitions.**  
Forum – *This signals that collections do not play a primary role in the museum.*

### Display

- **The display style encourages aesthetic reflection (white walls, objects placed far apart, individual lighting...).**  
Temple – *This signals that the visitor's focus is directed towards object in a worship-like manner.*
- **Text or interactive elements are the focus and obviously outweigh other elements in the exhibit.**  
Forum – *This signals that the museum is dialogue-based and collections play a secondary role.*

### Objects

- **The museum lists collection highlights or has a showstopper object (a specific unique object that the museum is known to house and is used in advertising).**  
Temple – *This signals that the museum relies on objects in their collections to entice visitors.*

### Didactics

- **The writing style of the text seems to come from an anonymous, scholarly voice.**  
Temple – *This signals that the museum imparts knowledge that is established and is not meant to be questioned or challenged.*



- **The text includes multiple perspectives on the given topic (this can come in the form of quotes, interviews, or discussion of different perspectives).**  
Forum – *This signals that the museum is open to presenting multiple sides of a topic to produce dialogue.*
- **The text uses rhetorical questions or similar tools to encourage critical thought and reflection rather than just imparting knowledge.**  
Forum – *This signals that the museum encourages critical thought and reflection to produce new thoughts and ideas on the given topic.*

### **Visitor Experience**

- **The atmosphere of the museum encourages visitors to be quiet or whisper.**  
Temple – *This signals that the museum crafts an environment that encourages a certain decorum.*
- **There are interactives which invite visitors to respond to or reflect upon exhibits (this can take the form of games, writing prompts, or ways to give feedback).**  
Forum – *This signals that the museum acknowledges that the visitor comes with valuable knowledge to add to the dialogue on the given topic.*

Figure 2. Criteria Planning

## **The Museum's Role Locator**

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This exercise guides the user through locating a museum's role on a range from temple to forum. It can be used for one museum or to compare up to ten museums at once.

This exercise requires the Evaluation Criteria and Locator Diagram handouts and research done through the museum(s) of study's website and in-person observation.

### **Purpose**

This exercise is a practice in critical museum visitor skills and is meant to help users engage in museum theory in reflecting on museum's role through the temple and forum dichotomy.

#### *Overview*

The temple and forum are two proposed ideals for the museum's role.

Functions of temples may include enshrining objects, reaffirming established values, and providing private space for reflection.

Functions of forums may include supporting the production of new thoughts and confronting established values by not being afraid of the radical or controversial.

### **Instructions**

Using the Locator Diagram, begin by placing the museum at the 'START' position.

Go through the Evaluation Criteria and determine whether the statements apply to the museum. This should be able to be determined through searches of the museum's website and in-person observation in combination.

If a statement applies to the museum, follow the italicized instructions below the statement to move the museum in the corresponding direction.

If a statement does not apply to the museum, do not move it.

Where the museum is located at the end of the evaluation represents whether the museum elicits more temple-like or forum-like cues.

### **Post-Exercise Discussion Questions**

- Is the final location of the museum what you expected?
- If the museum elicits both temple and forum cues, do you believe this is done effectively or does it lead to confusion for the visitor?
- Compare the museum's location to other museums – what are the similarities or differences?

Figure 3. The Museum's Role Locator Instructions

## Evaluation Criteria

---

- 1. The mandate, mission, or about statement discusses the museum's collection or objects.**  
*← move one space to the left*
- 2. The museum states an estimate number of objects in their collection.**  
*← move one space to the left*
- 3. The museum supports the creation of new work (through workshops, artist-in-residence programs, community projects, or other educational experiences).**  
*→ move one space to the right*
- 4. The museum is non-collecting or does not rely on collections to form exhibitions.**  
*→ move one space to the right*
- 5. The display style encourages aesthetic reflection (white walls, objects placed far apart, individual lighting...).**  
*← move one space to the left*
- 6. Text or interactive elements are the focus and obviously outweigh other elements in the exhibit.**  
*→ move one space to the right*
- 7. The museum lists collection highlights or has a showstopper object (a specific unique object that the museum is known to house and is used in advertising).**  
*← move one space to the left*
- 8. The writing style of the text seems to come from an anonymous, scholarly voice.**  
*← move one space to the left*
- 9. The text includes multiple perspectives on the given topic (this can come in the form of quotes, interviews, or discussion of different perspectives).**  
*→ move one space to the right*
- 10. The text uses rhetorical questions or similar tools to encourage critical thought and reflection rather than just imparting knowledge.**  
*→ move one space to the right*
- 11. The atmosphere of the museum encourages visitors to be quiet or whisper.**  
*← move one space to the left*
- 12. There are interactives which invite visitors to respond to or reflect upon exhibits (this can take the form of games, writing prompts, or ways to give feedback).**  
*→ move one space to the right*

Figure 4. Evaluation Criteria

Locator Diagram

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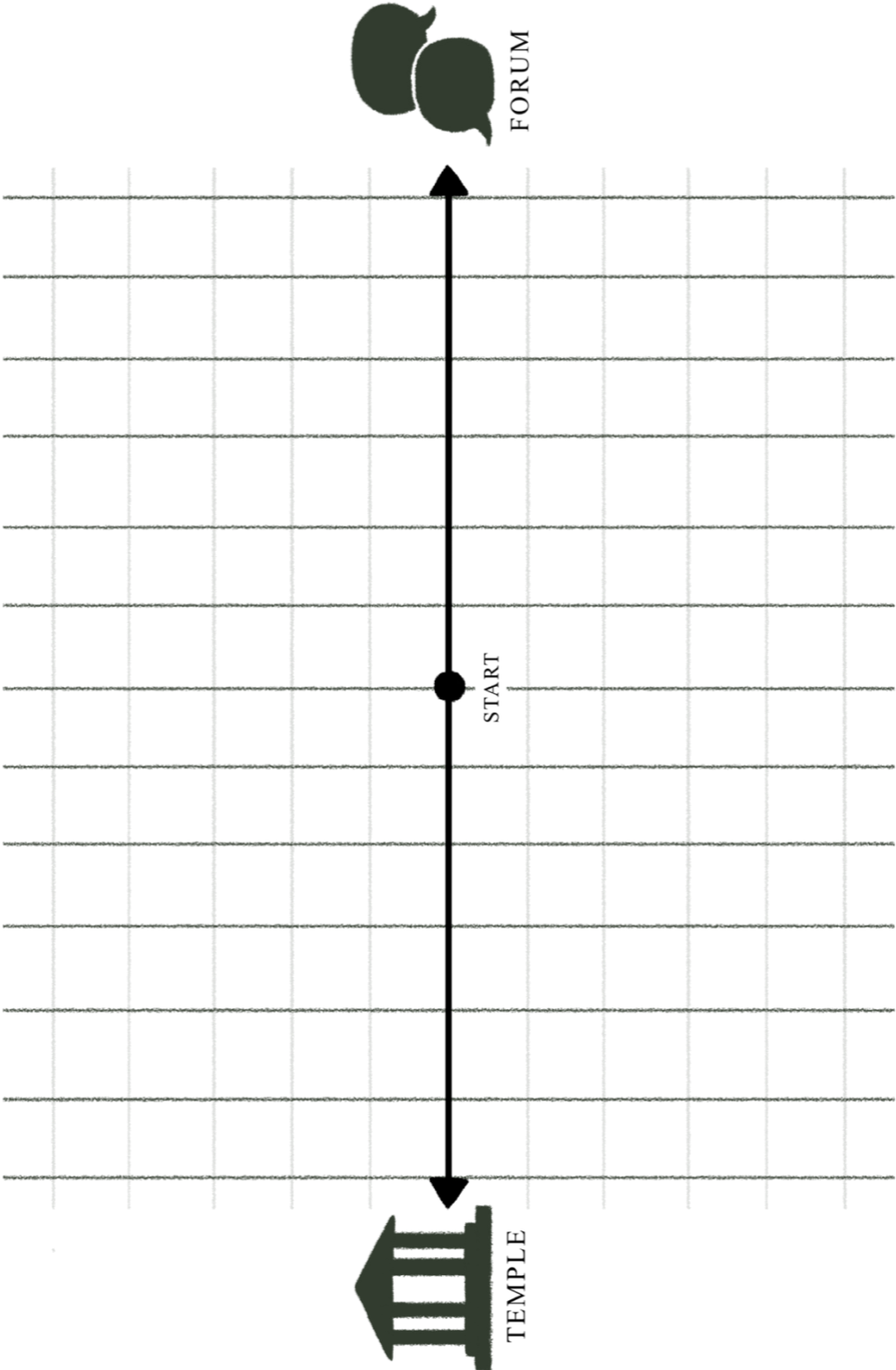


Figure 5. Locator Diagram

# Locator Diagram – Institution Test

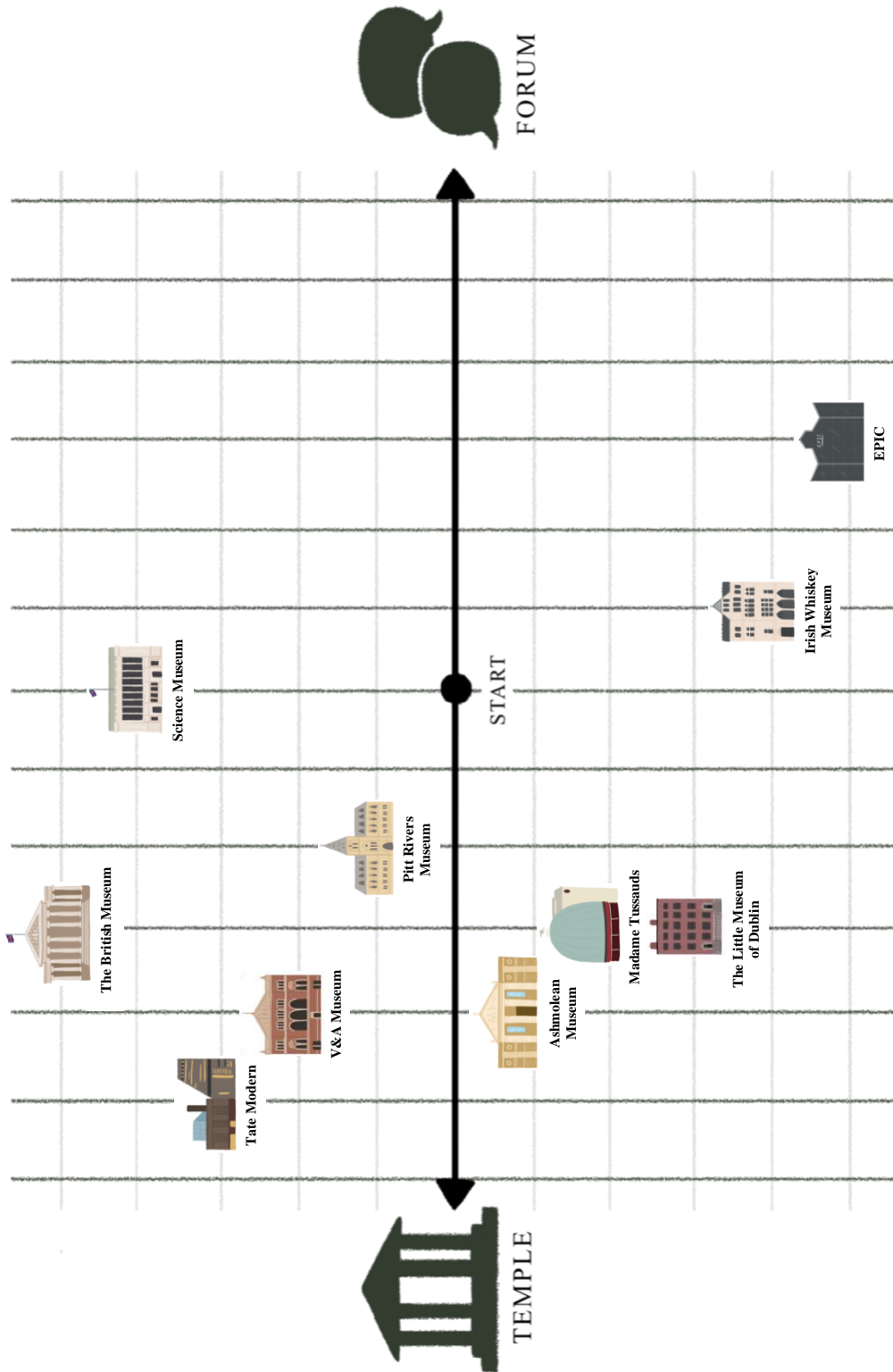


Figure 6. Locator Diagram – Institution Test