

Museums and Cultural Institutions as Platforms for Imagining Sustainable Futures

Amy Harris¹

¹Simon Fraser University,

¹amy_harris@sfu.ca,

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As the climate crisis gathers ever increasing momentum and its impacts wreak havoc on an unprepared world, mis- and disinformation about causes and solutions have left the public confused and uncertain as to how to act. As a result, they are searching for places that provide accurate and trusted information; enter, the cultural institution. In recent years, there have been a number of exhibitions taking place in many different types of museums and galleries around the world that engage with themes of climate change and sustainable futures, aiming to provide the public not only with desperately needed sources of reliable data, but also spaces where they can reflect, imagine, and create the conditions for those futures to be realised. Without the restriction of only needing to provide scientific facts and figures, these exhibitions draw on various mechanisms for communication and meaning making that not only appeal to a wide audience, but also serve to empower them. Building on previous work on the role of the imagination in climate change communication, this research explores key exhibitions that focus on the climate crisis, and asks how they are addressing the need to furnish agency on the viewer/visitor, without stimulating a fear response which only leads to indecision and delay. Further, this paper also addresses the uncomfortable histories that many cultural institutions have in furthering destructive imperial practices, and asks how that past impacts the efficacy of the stories being told, and what is being done to distance them from it.

The museum as a platform for climate crisis communication offers a unique space with which to explore questions related to the crisis, and what can be done to counter it for a more hopeful, preferred future. This research presents insights including commonalities found across multiple modes of engagement; highlights of the responses from visitors to the exhibitions; and puts a spotlight on best practice demonstrated by unique effective cases.