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# Cultural Sustainability and Social Inclusion: A Case Study of Contemporary Art Museums in Hungary

by Zsuzsanna Fehér, Melanie Kay Smith  
and Katalin Ásványi

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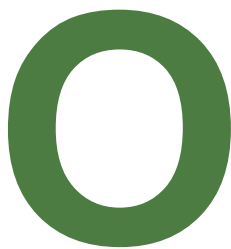
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In contemporary art museums, artists tend to reflect on the social problems that define the times in which they live. The question often arises as to whether artists can bring about social change by reflecting on the issues around them, which in a contemporary context often includes sustainability.

One of the most important basic functions of museums is to preserve the cultural resources of communities, not only for the present but also for future generations. Museums are primarily responsible for the preservation, care and transfer of cultural values, but they also provide visitors with emotional and intellectual experiences. They have become some of the most effective sites for free-choice learning, and their educational value has increased considerably with the growth of lifelong learning, (Málaga and Brown 2019). Museums of the future will likely be judged on how well they provide value to society through sensitivity to communities' specific needs (Brown 2019). They are transitioning from 'spaces of conservation' and exhibition into 'places of communication with society' (González-Herrera *et al.* 2023).

ICOM's new definition of museums (2022a) reflects the latter's growing emphasis on sustainability. The general aim of museums today is to achieve the greatest possible cultural, social and economic impact, while having minimal repercussions on the environment (Pop and Borza 2016). Research on SDGs (sustainable development goals) by CIMAM (International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art) demonstrates 'the importance of museums leading by example, respecting society, the environment, and their pivotal educational role within communities. Embracing this responsibility serves as the key driver for cultural institutions to enact positive change' (ICOM 2022b, n. page). Museums' principles of sustainability are built around two main objectives (Virto *et al.* 2017):

1. Building a deep, long-term relationship with the widest possible audience;
2. Responding to changing political, social, environmental, and economic contexts and developing a clear, long-term set of goals that reflect society's expectations.

Although there seems to be an obvious link between culture, museums and sustainability, the relationship has not been explored extensively. It is especially important to investigate the role of museums in cultural sustainability, the contribution of different stakeholders and the implications for cultural policy (Stylianou-Lambert *et al.* 2014). This article explores the meaning of cultural sustainability in museums, which overlaps with the United Nations 2030 SDGs in terms of inclusive, equitable education and lifelong learning, and focuses on contemporary art museums, which have been relatively under-researched compared to other types of museums. In contemporary art museums, artists tend to reflect on the social problems that define the times in which they live. The question often arises as to whether artists can bring about social change by reflecting on the issues around them, which in a contemporary context often includes sustainability.

In this article we present a case study of Hungary, a country in which the museum 'landscape' is undergoing change, with examples of already-innovative practices, especially involving contemporary art museums. 14 in-depth interviews with contemporary art museum professionals highlight the growing importance of cultural sustainability, while examples of artist-centred outreach projects with disadvantaged communities illustrate social inclusion in context. This research sheds light on the role of contemporary art museums in achieving the SDGs, diversifying audiences by reaching more communities and creating engaging experiences for visitors.

## Theoretical background

### Museums and sustainability

Museums are connected to and can advance the SDGs (United Nations 2015). An increasing number of museums are embracing these goals and leading by example (Cerquetti and Montella 2021). Regarding environmental sustainability, the role of museums can be understood at two levels: on the one hand, how much attention is paid to the museum's building and operations? On the other hand, how can it raise awareness around the importance of the environment? Research shows that exhibitions related to sustainability can contribute to changing visitors' behaviour at an

individual action level (Navas Iannini and Pedretti 2022). They can encourage visitors to become responsible citizens who act responsibly in their own communities, and make better and fairer choices about the environment.

Environmentally conscious operation is perhaps one of the biggest 21st-century challenges for museums, as they usually operate in large, often historic buildings with high energy consumption requirements. The future could bring a major breakthrough in the 'greening' of outdated, energy-intensive museum buildings, of which

there are a growing number of international examples that are either already implemented or in progress. For example, Aleksandrov (2021) presents a study on innovative solutions used in energy-efficient retrofitting of the old building of the Alvar Aalto Museum. Rome's MAXXI (National Museum of 21st Century Arts) is another notable example, as is the initiative of ICOM Austria, in which 17 Austrian museums were involved in interpreting the 17 SDG goals. Based on this last initiative, a manual was published in 2022 (ICOM Austria 2022), which includes best practices on how to implement the



Fig. 1. Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art. © Balázs Glódi

SDGs in museums. In Spain, thanks to the energy provider ACCIONA Green Energy Developments, 22 public museums already use electricity from renewable energy sources and there are plans to include more in the programme. The German Museums Association started to draw up a sustainability code with a draft certification model for museums and the organisations that operate them in 2023. However, cultural sustainability has not yet been a prominent focus in museum initiatives.

#### Cultural sustainability

Cultural sustainability was first defined by the World Commission on Culture and Development (1995) as facilitating intergenerational and trans-generational access to culture, with each generation acting as a user and custodian of cultural heritage for future generations. The concept implies that sustainable development takes place in a way

that respects society's cultural capital and values (Mpofu 2012). This dimension of sustainability is primarily concerned with safeguarding 'the continuity of cultural values that link past, present and future' (Kocaturk *et al.* 2023, p. 18). Throsby (2016) suggests that it is the job of a museum to serve the community and society and to create value for future generations. Museums have been defined as places where cultural content is created and where the crossover between cultures and generations is ensured (Llamazares de Prado 2021).

Although various sustainable museum models have been proposed in the past, including 'archétopy' (Campolmi 2013) and the 'ecological museum' (Jung 2011), this article was inspired mostly by the approach of Stylianou-Lambert *et al.* (2014), who consider culture as the fourth and most important pillar for the sustainable development of museums.

Their model takes into account recommendations from museum associations as well as discourses on multiculturalism, inclusion and community participation. Table 1 shows the parameters that should ideally be considered when designing (culturally) sustainable museums. In the original model (Stylianou-Lambert *et al.* 2014, p. 570) circles representing the different parameters intersect because certain parameters may be common to several pillars.

#### Cultural sustainability and social inclusion

The 21st century museum can be seen as a living institution and social space that stimulates community development, attracts visitors and encourages personal interactions with artists, through which people can be made aware of important current social issues (Pencarelli *et al.* 2016). Museums have increasingly been described as spaces

Economic	Environmental	Social	Cultural
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fundraising</li> <li>- Cultural tourism</li> <li>- Cultural employment</li> <li>- Economic revitalisation of local community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Urban planning and regeneration</li> <li>- Eco-buildings / Energy efficiency</li> <li>- Landscape planning</li> <li>- Environmental education</li> <li>- Eco-events / Exhibitions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Wellbeing</li> <li>- Sense of place</li> <li>- Social responsibility</li> <li>- Active citizenship / Participation Engagement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Heritage preservation</li> <li>- Cultural skills and knowledge</li> <li>- Memory / Identity</li> <li>- New audiences / Inclusion</li> <li>- Cultural diversity / Intercultural dialogue</li> <li>- Creativity and innovation</li> <li>- Artistic vitality</li> </ul>

Table 1. Most important elements in a culture-focused four-dimensional museum model (based on Stylianou-Lambert *et al.* 2014, p. 570).



Fig. 2. Visitors with visual impairment at Emese Benczúr's installation *Feel*, 2019, *Common Affairs* exhibition, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art. © Balázs Glódi

of social empowerment and agents with social responsibility (González-Herrera *et al.* 2023). Cultural sustainability is especially important because culture is a universal right, which needs to be considered from an inclusive perspective. Culture needs to be made accessible to all people regardless of their intellectual, physical, sensory or other conditions, which means adapting spaces and creating experiences that take special needs into consideration (González-Herrera *et al.* 2023). Museums have been referred to as agents of social inclusion since the 1990s, referring primarily to the need to reach the widest possible audience (Sandell 1998). However, Wang *et al.* (2020) found that certain factors like educational attainment by occupation, academic interest, income, distance, age and gender still influence museum attendance. Morse (2021) refers to the museum as a 'space of social care' which should provide practical and emotional support for people so that they can engage with culture on their own terms.

As a museum practice, social inclusion means making the cultural dimension accessible to a wider range of visitors. It also refers to museums' capacity to empower their visitors in social, economic and political dimensions (Huang and Liem 2022). The new museum definition from ICOM (2022a)

states that visitor experiences should provide 'education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing'. Implicit in these aims is the need to consider social diversity, accessibility and inclusion (Springinzeisz 2022). Inclusion has been defined as a philosophy or frame of reference that is based on values such as sustainability, as well as respect for differences, participation, collaboration and trust (Gigerl *et al.* 2022).

According to Nielsen (2015) the sustainability of a museum depends on its relevance to the community and visitors, and according to Viau-Courville (2021) museums need to place greater emphasis on developing community participation projects. This is not only important for them in terms of knowledge transfer, but also as a means of building cultural awareness. Worts (2015) argues for rethinking and restructuring culture by assessing the cultural needs of the community and examining how museums can benefit from developing new 'out-of-the-box' strategies to engage diverse audiences.

Increasingly, museums are moving away from autocratic, one-way cultural mediation from above. Instead, they are approaching the visitor as an active interpreter who creates his or her understanding of the work based on personal

experiences, associations, doubts and identity, making the museum 'an open work that is completed by the visitor' (Stylianou-Lambert 2010, p. 141). Aurel *et al.* (2017) suggest that the contemporary museum should be visitor-oriented, stimulating and collaborative, but also discrete and innovative. Public involvement and engagement can be increased through the improvement of technology and digitalisation (Guccio *et al.* 2016). According to Schaper *et al.* (2018), interactivity can help reach many potential visitors who avoid museums because they believe that strict rules of behaviour limit the visitor experience. Carr (2021) investigates the importance of age diversity for the sustainability of museums and the role of younger generations who are more socially connected and socially aware. Opening museum boards to younger participants can help museums respond flexibly to these challenges and ensure the sustainability of museums now and in the future.

#### Contemporary art museums

Traditionally, contemporary art museums have been considered less 'democratic' than other types of museums (Hooper-Greenhill 2007). One of the biggest challenges they face is that they are typically visited by audiences with higher education degrees. A large percentage of the population does not



Fig. 3. Ludwig 30. *Always Contemporary* exhibition interior, 2019, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art. © József Rosta

see these museums as places where they belong or feel comfortable (Simon 2010). Gigerl *et al.* (2022) suggest that, despite their great efforts towards social inclusion, contemporary art museums still have a long way to go. Sergi (2021) has argued that social diversity needs to be visible in collections and artworks so that museums do not continue to be agents of social exclusion. However, among the different types of museums, contemporary art institutions are perhaps the best equipped to reflect on the social problems of our time.

Azmat *et al.* (2018) underline the impact of art-based intervention on sustainable development. They emphasise its social contributions, such as educating and creating awareness about various social problems. At the individual level, this involves building pride, self-esteem, knowledge, awareness, social transformation, confidence and tolerance. At the organisational level, it serves as a platform that creates social harmony, breaks down barriers of ignorance and connects people. At the societal level, it increases social inclusion, cohesion, transformation and harmony and strengthens communities.

In museums working with living artists, there is much more opportunity for joint thinking between the artist and society, for creative diversity and for

learning related to current and future visions of society (CIMAM 2023). In 2023, the CIMAM conference (Buenos Aires) focused for the first time on the social role of contemporary art museums. Through contemporary art, art museums can form a bridge between the active creative community and today's society. Such museums can function as important places for inclusivity and social justice by creating public spaces for reflection. One prominent example of this is the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands. Their temporary exhibition *Everything Worthwhile is Done With Other People* (2023) examined 'how the museum can serve long-term collaborative practices centred on sustainable and conscious working methods' (e-flux 2023, n. page).

#### The Hungarian context

One recently published study shows the regional differences in sustainability between European contemporary art museums (Fehér and Ásványi 2023). The research revealed that the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe (including Hungary) have many social, economic and political characteristics that can affect the sustainable operation of museums, such as lack of access to culture for disadvantaged communities or lack of sponsorship of culture. Further investigation is needed to better understand this phenomenon. The book *Open*

*Museum* (Frazon, 2018), one of the most important contributions in Hungarian research on the topics in question, explores the possibilities of museums' role in community participation and cooperation and how they can become more socially orientated.

In 2021-22, the Pulszky Society (Hungarian Museum Association) organised a series of workshops on the topic of museum sustainability in which professionals from 22 museums participated. The goal was to brainstorm, share good examples and develop the sustainability strategy of each museum. Following international initiatives, ICOM Hungary's conference entitled *Museums, Sustainability, and Wellbeing* (2023) examined the role of museums in relation to three sustainable development goals: health and wellbeing (SDG 3), climate change (SDG 13) and terrestrial ecosystem protection (SDG 15). A recent exhibition at the Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, *Handle With Care* (2023), highlights that museums have a caring role, from the careful handling of artefacts to interacting with the challenges affecting society to the protection of nature and Earth.



Fig. 4. Participation of young visitors in collective creation at the *Ludwig 30. Always Contemporary* exhibition, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art. © Krisztina Szipőcs

## Research method

Museums, especially in Hungary, still have significant gaps in their sustainable practices and need to make a conscious effort to connect themselves more integrally to the societies in which they operate. Museum professionals have been increasingly concerned about the changes affecting their institutions: dwindling public funding, changing visitor expectations, the challenges of new technology, the growing focus on the environment and the widening gaps between different social groups. The research in this study therefore addresses some of these issues with reference to contemporary art museums in Hungary,

with a special focus on the Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art. Our two main research questions are the following: What is the relationship between contemporary art museums and cultural sustainability?; How do contemporary art museums address social inclusion within the context of cultural sustainability?

We conducted in-depth interviews with 14 contemporary art museum professionals<sup>1</sup> in Hungary to assess the growing importance of cultural sustainability. The interviews were undertaken with professionals from different

functional areas including museum education, curatorship, communication and marketing. Non-probability sampling was used. The questions were open-ended and a content analysis method was used to process the answers. The semi-structured interviews contained 15 main questions and consisted of two parts. The purpose of the first part was to explore the museum work methods employed by the participants and the challenges they face. The second part focused on their experiences of cooperation with a wider audience, particularly with disadvantaged communities.

## Findings

The research examined several issues related to cultural sustainability in the context of contemporary art museums. These include encouraging wider participation in art, examining the ways in which museums engage with communities, the process of knowledge sharing and the design of visitor experiences.

### Engaging communities

During the interviews, museum professionals explained that encouraging participation in art is one of the basic conditions for encouraging cultural sustainability, as fewer and fewer people are interested in art. Many people do not visit museums due to lack of interest, money or time. The museum

professionals we interviewed believe that younger generations consider culture to be somewhat 'dry and boring'. They stated that museums are more successful in countries like Germany or the United Kingdom where museum visits have become a part of everyday life, which is not the case in Hungary.



Fig. 5. Museum educator plays chess with visually impaired visitor, *Ludwig 30. Always Contemporary* exhibition, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art. © Dániel Végel

If museums want to reach a wider audience, they need to help people to understand art, as not all visitors have a cultural knowledge base. The interviewees believe that more visual education is needed, and it should start at a very young age: in kindergarten. A new pictogram system using an information communication tool was developed by museum professionals, designers and educators in museum spaces to promote inclusivity of people with text comprehension difficulties, including children and the elderly. These initiatives were developed during a series of tests and refined by educational specialists targeting affected groups and individuals, and have already been used by the Kassák Museum, Ludwig Museum and Museum of Ethnography in Hungary. In addition to the pictograms, exhibition wall text and leaflets were also used to translate the abstract conceptual reflections typical of contemporary art practice into easily understandable language.

Anyone trying to understand a work of art in a museum needs to develop cognitive skills, which museums themselves can try to encourage through education or other forms of experience. Creative workshops and participatory methods can help in developing people's expressive skills and in understanding the processes behind art. However, there can also be some challenges, as the case study below illustrates.

#### Experimental exhibitions: the challenges of visitor engagement at the Ludwig Museum

The Ludwig Museum in Budapest was founded by Irene and Peter Ludwig in 1989, just before the fall of communist rule. Since its founding, the museum has represented a new voice in Central and Eastern Europe and has been a significant force in shaping the Hungarian contemporary art scene. With its progressive exhibitions and museum education methodology, it plays a proactive role in the process of museum renewal. In 2019 and for the first time in Hungary<sup>2</sup>, the Ludwig Museum introduced a new museum model that gave visitors much more space to interact with and reflect on exhibitions instead of passively observing. This was an important milestone in the process of engage visitors. As the museum was being re-designed, professionals identified several challenges related to interacting with a wider range of visitors and also started to understand the limits of their flexibility.

In 2019, the *Ludwig 30: Always Contemporary* exhibition was organised on the occasion of the museum's 30th anniversary. The concept of the exhibition was to realise the idea of an open, inclusive museum. The exhibition invited visitors on a journey through time, from past to present to future. The museum staff jointly developed various participatory methods, a basic principle of sustainable

museum operation where everyone contributes to creating the exhibition content. The starting point was contemporary art and the collection, but interaction with the visitors was given the same importance, shifting the emphasis from artefacts to dialogue.

In the central and largest space of the exhibition area, four temporary exhibitions featuring pieces from the collection (each comprising 10-15 works on average) were alternated every two weeks. In the surrounding spaces, the museum created different opportunities for visitors to interact. It was important to offer both children and adult visitors challenges that encouraged them to engage their creative, physical or cognitive abilities. For example, in a square room, each of the four walls was linked to an exhibition of the *Ludwig 30*, where visitors were invited to create a collective work. There were tools and instructions related to the theme and for a 2-week period visitors could use these tools to create something. In one of the rooms, there was a section called 'My Museum' where visitors could submit personal objects that in some way related or responded to a particular work in the collection. This approach allowed them to take on a curatorial role and participate in the narrative.



Fig. 6. Teachers participating at workshop related to the *Handle with Care* exhibition, 2023, Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art. © Zsófia Szabó

However, some artists who had previously been rejected by the curators due to not achieving the ‘quality’ of exhibit required by the museum, posed as average museum visitors and brought in their work. In the most extreme manifestation, some photographed their works in the space and announced on social media that their exhibition had opened at the museum. Staff were shocked by this unexpected event and considered it a breach of professionalism, but concluded that they should think more carefully about this type of invitation in the future to address the sensitivities of artists as well as the general public.

Visitors were also able to vote on artworks from the collection using an online platform, and those with the most votes were displayed in the final exhibition. The initiative was very popular, but users hacked the system and collected votes for their own choices and purposes. Once again, the museum viewed the process as a failure, despite its good intentions of encouraging visitor engagement and involvement. Voting is a good way to activate the audience and staff would like to use it in the future, but it requires digital solutions that exclude such hacking possibilities.

There were a set of tasks and tools for reflecting on each exhibition section. In the first case, it was very simple — creating graffiti — and many people drew and left prints on the museum wall. However, for the last two exhibitions, the tasks became more difficult and fewer people attempted them. In one challenging task, visitors were asked to reflect on the meaning of ‘sharing’ using predefined pictorial icons; in another, they were asked to organise an exhibition using a small-scale exhibition space model and printed artwork photographs. Visitors broke the rules by creating their own ideas and scrawling graffiti on walls that were not intended for this purpose. It was concluded that instructions needed to be simpler and clearer.

The exhibition was accompanied by a survey. Volunteers at the entrance asked visitors to fill in a questionnaire on arrival and departure, which sought to explore visitors’ preconceptions of a contemporary art exhibition and to judge whether they viewed a work by an artist invited by the organisers as ‘art’. The results of the questionnaire were presented in a workshop by museum experts and the research provoked strong reactions among the professionals and visitors who participated regarding what the visitors considered to be art compared to the curators. This raises important questions about who should decide what is

art and which pieces should be included in a museum’s exhibition.

As one communication expert stated in an interview, the exhibition was very well attended and the public’s enthusiasm for the museum’s exhibitions has continued. Therefore, from a visitor perspective, the museum exhibition seemed to have been a success. However, museum professionals found it difficult to accept that visitors did not cooperate in the way they had intended. ‘We think we made a huge step forward,’ the expert explained. ‘The museum collectively conceived and implemented an art project with the collection at its core, we showed what we thought about the museum, we encouraged visitors to participate, the exhibition space became interactive and multi-voiced. We modelled a museum of the future, but one that went beyond us.’

As Simon (2010) notes, the ‘chief difference between traditional and participatory design is the way that information flows between institutions and users’ (n. page). In the participatory approach ‘[d]esigners focus on making the content consistent and high quality, so that every visitor, regardless of her background or interests, receives a reliably good experience.’ (Ibid.). Simon also states that ‘[t]he institution serves as a “platform” that connects different users

who act as content creators, distributors, consumers, critics and collaborators' (Ibid.). In this case, there seems to be room for further discussion and understanding of how to harmonise the design of visitor experiences with the (desired) behaviour of the end users. This may require further research on and understanding of visitor profiles, needs and motivations to avoid 'top-down' assumptions.

### Creating awareness about different social, environmental and economic problems

Curators explained in interviews that when they are planning an exhibition, such as the Ludwig Museum's 2021 *Slow Life*, they are in constant dialogue with living artists and are confronted in their own work and personal lives with the real-time societal challenges that contemporary art is increasingly facing. Contemporary art museums are increasingly engaging in collaborative projects based on socially sensitive themes, recognising the pivotal role of artists in identifying and addressing such issues. Visitors can engage in such art projects by responding to the artwork and the social problems represented. 'Contemporary art deals with migration and criticism of capitalism, which is also linked to the climate catastrophe and the global impact of the endless exploitation of natural resources', noted one curator. 'These topics are also present in contemporary art and our curatorial team is currently dealing with a related exhibition concept.'

Through their exhibition narratives, museums play an important role in mediating, raising awareness and thereby shaping visitors' perceptions. Exhibition curators are central to thematising public discourse about social issues, thus shaping perceptions by communicating messages to wider audiences.

The central idea behind the exhibition *Slow Life: Radical Practices of the Everyday* was conceived almost two years before the Covid-19 pandemic. During the months that the Ludwig Museum's curatorial team had been working on the preparation and implementation of the exhibition and programme series — scheduled to open for nearly five months in April 2020 — they could not have guessed how close and pressing its topics would become as a result of the global pandemic. 'Slow life'

had all of a sudden become an everyday reality, a forced way of life in the global world. As stated in the introduction to the exhibition:

The slow approach represents a need to rethink existing structures and reorganise established practices in the fields of society, economy and everyday life alike. Its essence can be best expressed by consciousness and a critical attitude, from ethical consumption and voluntary simplicity to the concept of a no-growth economy. (Slow Life: Radical Practices of the Everyday, wall text)

The 'quarantine of consumption', the Stay Home Movement, the decline in air travel and the slowing economy are just some of the unexpected consequences of the virus, which vividly point to the positive effects of a 'slower life', but also pose enormous challenges to humanity.

Through the reflections of the contemporary artists, the visitors were able to get involved both intellectually and emotionally in the topic. A micro-site was also created for the exhibition, where additional interviews and videos could be found. The site was also used for educational purposes and the museum educators held online lessons for students related to the topic.

### Art education as a tool for social transformation

Museum professionals emphasised the irreplaceable role of art education and artistic expression in individual development and education and in shaping society. The greatest benefit of art education is that disadvantaged people are exposed to a creative environment that removes them from their daily lives and which they can later remember with fondness. 'I have had students living in deep poverty, and I have had students living in prison, I think it was interesting for them just to be able to come into a museum, such an elitist environment, and be part of a collective thinking', a museum educator explained.

At the same time, it is important that people with disadvantaged backgrounds are not isolated as visitors: they should instead be integrated with other visitors in museum visits or educational activities. One of the museum educators described how 'every year a group of

young people from disadvantaged backgrounds from the countryside comes to a Lego programme on the night of the museums. They don't get a separate session, but they meet the visitors and talk to them, so there is a connection.'

Museums usually come into contact with disadvantaged groups by working with organisations that deal with communities in some kind of difficulty. As one of the museum educators explained:

For me, one of the highlights of the Homeless in Museums programme was when homeless people and museum education professionals sat around a table after a tour of the museum to discuss the importance of and further opportunities for programmes like this. This was an important step not only for them to find their way back into society, but also for us museum professionals to develop our self-awareness, to re-tune our conscience, to redefine the notion of responsibility.

The role of museums in the lives of homeless people is very significant, as the programmes designed for them help to increase their self-esteem, self-evaluation and self-confidence. For participants, it is a matter of prestige: getting into these programmes is special, offering the opportunity to experience something new and increase their quality of life (SDG 3). These initiatives also promote social reintegration (SDG 10) and develop their social and communication skills (SDG 4). The programmes also support the elimination of hunger (SDG 2).

One of the biggest challenges identified by the experts was how to transfer knowledge to people with disabilities, because their senses may be different from able-bodied or neurotypical visitors, for example; museums therefore need to understand how they relate to the world. For example, visually impaired people are a distinct community whose social-cognitive isolation is a particular social problem. For them, visuality is mostly conceived of as a distant memory or a present absence. One museum educator stated that 'In such a connection, inner vision may be the common denominator, which is given to everyone — the question is how much attention we pay to it.'

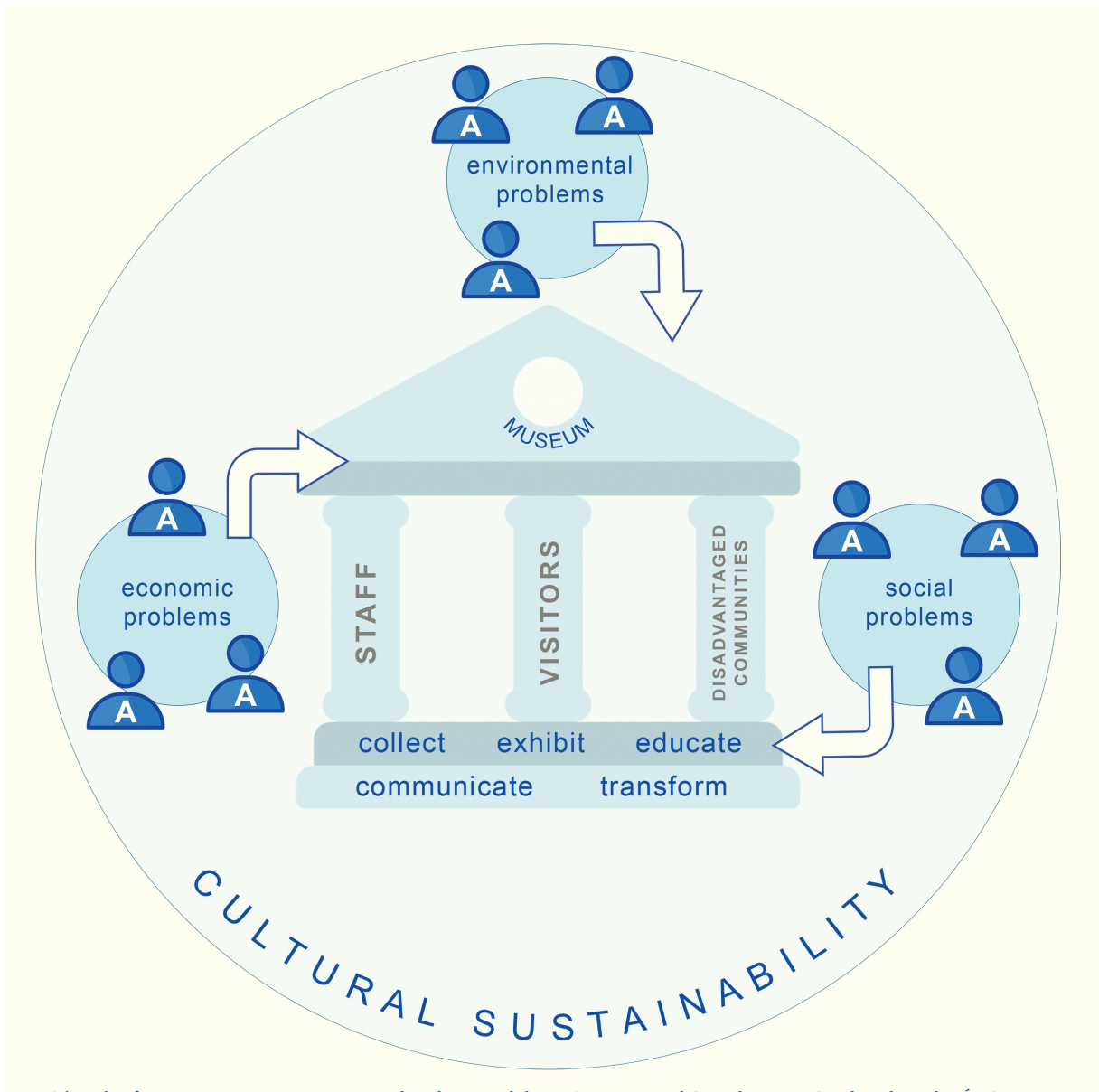


Fig. 7. The role of contemporary art museums in cultural sustainability. © Zsuzsanna Fehér, Melanie Kay Smith and Katalin Ásványi

### Common Affairs: Ludwig Museum

The Ludwig Museum's exhibition *Common Affairs*, which was hailed by the interviewed experts as one of the most successful projects, presented seven collaborative art projects. The projects tackled social problems as diverse as loneliness in old age, lack of knowledge transfer between different generations of artists, the integration of newly forming communities moving to the countryside and the struggles of the micro-world of people working in rural agriculture. The project that had the strongest impact was *Floating House*, which addressed the process of community disintegration, displacement, increasing poverty and marginalisation of place: all the broader socio-economic processes that have continued for decades in the former industrial areas of large cities. One of the main victims of this process are the children who live there, for whom

this environment cannot function as a liveable home. The artist (Bence Zsin) who lives in this environment himself, recognised the problem and, with the help of his primary school pupils, invented a story that allowed the children to tell their own stories.

During the project, the children created a floating house with the help of the artist and described what home meant to them. They toured villages in the area with their presentation, and at the end of the project they lowered the floating house into the water of an abandoned mine. A large crowd gathered, and the positive responses from the audience made the students appreciate a place in their lives that they had considered completely worthless. The project lived on in the museum's exhibition, confronting a wide range of visitors with the problem and fostering social awareness and

responsibility. According to the experts we interviewed, if you can make choices and decisions in your imagination or in a fictional world, you can do the same in real life. A one-off art project can help to bring about positive social change if it can present situations, problems and solutions in novel ways.

**M**useums have transitioned from being primarily spaces for conservation and collections to becoming socially diverse spaces: ones that contribute to cultural sustainability by making culture more accessible to a wider range of people (González-Herrera *et al.* 2023). Although the fundamental aim of many museums is to encourage visitor education, they are also becoming agents of social and political responsibility, positive change and empowerment (ICOM 2022b; Huang and Liem 2022). Cultural sustainability in the context of museums is as important as the other more established pillars of sustainability (economic, environmental and social) because of its close connections to lifelong learning and the transferring of cultural values from one generation to another (Throsby 2016; Llamazares de Prado 2021). As emphasised in the Stylianou-Lambert *et al.* (2014) sustainable museum model, the cultural pillar is closely connected to cultural skills and knowledge, cultural diversity, new audiences and inclusion.

Sustainability has been described as an ‘inclusive value’ (Gigerl *et al.* 2022) and the sustainability of a museum depends on its relationship to visitors and communities (Nielsen 2015). However, being socially inclusive has proved challenging in the past, especially for art museums (Hooper-Greenhill 2007; Simon 2010; Gigerl *et al.* 2022). Stylianou-Lambert *et al.* (2014) refer to ‘artistic vitality’, which clearly plays an important role in the creation of art, but it is also key to engaging visitors in that art, e.g. through personal interactions with art and artists (Pencarelli *et al.* 2016). Research demonstrates the unique role that contemporary art museums play in cultural sustainability through their social inclusion activities, where they act as a mediator between living artists and their communities — for example, in the Ludwig Museum’s *Common Affairs* project. Their mission is twofold: to recognise the authentic, quality art that forms the basis of their collections, and to educate and shape the attitudes of visitors through their exhibitions.

Art-based interventions involving living artists that are connected to specific social problems can clearly have multiple benefits for individuals, organisations and wider society (Amzat *et al.* 2018; CIMAM 2023). This includes engaging in ‘broken world thinking’, which connects more closely to the social, economic and environmental challenges facing societies today and advancing discourses about community wellbeing (Morse 2021). Museums can be likened to open works that are completed by the visitors who become active interpreters (Stylianou-Lambert 2010, Carr 2001). Technology and digitalisation are clearly playing an increasingly important role (Guccio *et al.* 2016), in addition to other forms of interactivity (Schaper *et al.* 2018). This includes living artists who leave the physical museum to engage communities in interactive workshops, for example with homeless people and socio-culturally disadvantaged people such as Roma youth. This approach goes beyond digital solutions and advocates for personal contact. The model developed as a result of this research helps to better understand the role of contemporary art museums in achieving cultural sustainability goals (Fig. 7).

Our research has shown that the social consciousness and critical attitudes of contemporary artists can help raise visitor awareness about different contemporary problems (e.g. social, economic or environmental). However, engaging with visitors is an increasing challenge for contemporary art museums, who recognise that traditional exhibition techniques are no longer sufficient and they need to experiment with new solutions. The example of the Ludwig Museum in Budapest

has highlighted some innovative practices as well as unforeseen challenges: ones that should prompt museum professionals to question their methods and approaches.

To enhance the engagement of disadvantaged people in exhibitions, contemporary art museums should ensure inclusive and equitable quality education (SDG 4), enable cultural participation and promote inclusion for all (SDGs 10.2 and 11.7). To achieve these goals, direct internal and external leadership, management and partnership (SDG 17) are also needed. Further research is required to design exhibition models that help museums develop long-term relationships with artists, visitors and disadvantaged groups. This research approached the issue of cultural sustainability from the point of view of museum professionals; however, it would be useful to explore the views of other stakeholders, for example artists, visitors and communities, in future studies. Morse's (2021) work on the role of museums in 'social care' may also offer some useful avenues for transcending social inclusion and increasing the wellbeing of communities.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Museum professionals were from the Ludwig Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts (Budapest) and freelance contemporary art museum educators.

<sup>2</sup> Hungary is home to the following contemporary art museums: the Museum of Fine Arts – Hungarian National Gallery, the Kassák Museum and the Kiscell Museum, all in Budapest, and the MODEM Center for Modern and Contemporary Art in Debrecen.

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