

## COMMUNICATION AND MUSEUMS: MUSEUMS AS A PLACE OF DISCOURSE

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### Abstract

*Museums are to communicate their meaning to societies through their discourse. Through the discourse, museums are to convey certain values, ideas or truths to societies. The discourse of a museum embraces a power which can generate or instill a common sense and reinforce or give new insight to museum visitors. Up to a point, the discourse of a museum can be in agreement or in contradiction with the existing knowledge and beliefs of visitors. To understand museums is to understand the discourse of museums. No two museums are the same. It is the discourse of a museum that makes museums different and meaningful to societies. No discourse is neutral. "Museums are invention of men....They exist for the things we put in them (Silver, cited in Weil, 1990, p. xiv)." The discourse of museums is subjected to the arrangement of mankind. This paper is to look into the way museums garnish their objects and functions with specific concepts and assumptions to impart into the understanding of museum visitors of the discourses of museums. Museums as a place of discourse are to influence the visitors' perception and understanding of the world at large.*

**Keywords:** museums, discourse, communication, meaning

### INTRODUCTION

In the United Kingdom, many people relate museums to images of kings and queens and armour and weapons (Marstine, 2006). To them, museums are princely galleries and castles. In the United States of America, many regard museums as the most trustworthy and objective institutions for children education (Marstine, 2006). According to a survey which was done by the American Association of Museums (AAM), 87 percent of the respondents judged museums trustworthy while 67 percent and 50 percent judged books and television news trustworthy respectively (Marstine, 2006). To the American, museums are credible sources for gaining knowledge and understanding their surroundings.

Some museums regard themselves as social driven mechanisms. They advocate the importance to respect and to associate with communities. Museums are to help communities develop (MacDonald, 2011) so as to improve the quality and well-being of communities and society at large. Some see themselves as top-down authoritarian organisations. They are to mould cultural identities to generate a self-recognition of people towards their own identities and to continue with the identities (Šola, 1997).

Museums are "impresarios of meaning performances (Hein, 2000, p.65)." Treading through the timeline of museum development, from museums as an ancient Greek inception to museums as a modern enterprise in today's world and from

museums as Cabinets of Curiosity catering to the connoisseurs during the Renaissance Period to the transformation of museums into a public institutions today, museums performed different meanings to make themselves meaningful to their temporal and spatial context. By making themselves meaningful to a society, the linkage between museums and societies is confirmed.

Museums are to communicate their meaning to societies through their discourse which embraces certain values, ideas or truths to societies. It has the power to represent, to generate and to instill an inevitable and an indispensable common sense which is able to conceptualise the mindset of visitors. The discourse of museums lays the foundation which shapes the vision, mission and eventually the meaning of museums to societies and to enable visitors to make sense and to understand the world. However, museums are not neutral spaces. They are to design their discourse to communicate their meaning to frame the expectation of visitors and the societies at large.

The paper is a continuation of a series of research of the researcher. The series of research is to look into the identities, functions and contributions of museums to societies. With respect to this paper, the research methodology was purely qualitative. The validity of this paper lays in those primary data collected through

personal interviews with Directors and administrators of renowned museums such as the British Museum in London, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the National Museum Bangkok, and to be supported by secondary data from books, museum journals and reports and publications published by museums. The weakness of this paper is that the paper was written from the perspective of museums; while not from the perspective of museum visitors. Hence, it is still remain unknown whether museum visitors received the discourse which museums intend to communicate.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Discourse of Museums Frames The Expectations of Visitors**

Museum studies are demarcated into two concepts: traditional and new museum concept. Traditional museum concept emphasises on the physical value of objects inside museums; while new concept emphasises on the meaning and the influential value of objects inside museums and the roles and functions of museums; in particular towards local communities. Despite this difference, the two concepts share and agree to the potential power of the discourse of museums. The discourse of the former concept is to convey the importance of objects inside museums; particularly those masterpieces. The latter is to

communicate the responsibilities of museums towards societies.

“No single museum can respond to all social needs with equal effectiveness; for this reason alone we must have a variety of museums and museum styles, serving different purposes or tackling challenges from different approaches (MacDonald, cited in Karp, Kreamer and Lavine, 1992, p. 159).” Visitors visit museums for different reasons. Some visit museums for those objects inside museums. Up to a point, objects inside museums can speak for themselves (Weil, 1990). They can let visitors explore the relationship between objects and those notions such as aestheticism, preciousness, heritage, authenticity and memory. Some visit museums for the enrichment of their understanding of the world. Zahava Doering of the Office of Institutional Studies at the Smithsonian found out that the most satisfactory exhibitions were those which could resonate visitors “with their experience and provide new information in ways that confirm and enrich their view of the world (cited in Weil, 2002, p. 206).”

Knowing visitors visit museums with expectations, museums design their discourse to frame these expectations. If the meaning of to frame is to “provide an ideologically based narrative context that colors our understanding of what’s included (Marstine, 2006, p.4),” then museums are to

design their discourses to set a boundary to let visitors understand what is within the boundary. If the meaning of to frame in accordance with Preziosi is “a process to create a vision of the past and future based on contemporary needs (Marstine, 2006, p.4),” then museums are to use their discourse to link visitors to the outside world in accordance with the needs of museums.

### **The Discourse of Museums Reflects The Temporal and Spatial Contexts of Museums**

Prior to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of a museum was still quite blurred. The concept was believed to have taken shape under the Florence-based Medici Family in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The concept was to show off the power and wealth of the family. Ever since then, the discourse of museums had been to reflect their temporal and spatial contexts. The Renaissance Period was marked by the anxiety of people to investigate into the world from the perspective of mankind. During that period, museums were in the form of cabinets: the Cabinets of Curiosity. They were private spaces to reveal a time when people were searching for new meanings of life amid the fading influences of religions. These cabinets were stuffed with newly discovered and exotic objects such as distorted mirrors and ivories. The objects were collections of the new bourgeoisies. The discourse of the

Cabinets was to reflect the quest of these bourgeoisies for a better understanding of the secular world.

The continuous search for the odd or exception had reached a stage that the world became too complex and complicated to be represented by the Cabinets. The Cabinets of Curiosity gradually evolved into spaces of specialisation. Religion was not considered to advance human progress. Rationalism and science began to dominate the mindset of people. Art had become a science and a visual education. The size of measurement of paintings was standardised. Those sizes which did not meet the standard had to be cut down or to be extended. Classical sculptures had to be in perfect shapes. Those with missing limbs had to have their limbs restored. The discourse of museums was to instruct and to edify the public.

The search for rationale finally evolved to such an extent that the Western Powers bore a mission to mould a homogeneous society locally and internationally. They believed that people had to be enlightened rationally. They also believed that those countries with a lesser civilisation had to be enlightened as well. Museums had to be publicly accessed so that the whole public could be enlightened. Museums were to illustrate the achievements of these Powers who thought that they had successfully brought an equal opportunity to all people to progress. Museums were then

displayed with valuable objects which were originated from those countries being enlightened. They were to demonstrate the power and the achievements of these Powers to evident the fulfillment of the task of homogeneity. The discourse of museums at the Age of Enlightenment was to glorify the greatness of these accomplishments.

The world had experienced dramatic changes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Monarchies in Europe and Asia started to fall one after another: some became constitutional monarchies; while some become republics. Russia and Japan shifted the balance of power eastward to the west. The concept of equity re-echoed the mindset of people; but from another perspective: Communism.

In the second half of the century, under the influence of the declaration of four basic consumer rights by John F. Kennedy, the former president of the United States of America, publications such as the *Silent Spring* by Rachael Carson in 1962 and *Unsafe at Any Speed* by Ralph Nader in 1965, the popularity of television, the Cold War and the concern of the Vietnamese War, people became more aware of their livelihoods, their rights, their heritage, their environment and their mutual relationship. The discourse of museums began to steer to a direction to respond to the awareness.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) was formed in 1946 and a new series of new museology emerged in the

1960s. They aimed to address the importance of museums to be relevant to societies. In 1972, the ICOM declared that museums have to integrate with societies (Karp, Kreamer & Lavine, 1992). In 1984, the Commission on Museums for a New Century of the American Association of Museums considered “the proliferation of voices and pluralism of American society as primary forces of social change, which it applauds (cited in Hein, 2000, p. 44).” In the 1998 summit which was organised by the American Association of Museums in collaboration with some of the International Council of Museums’ members and committee stated the importance to protect and to diffuse the culture and natural heritage of the United States of America (Weil, 2002). The discourse of museums was to affirm the cultural identity of different races, preserving national culture and natural heritage.

Today, museums are to serve the society, and be responsible for the development of society (Weil, 1990). Museums are to respond to the massive changes of the macro environment within which they work and the social and cultural context of people. The discourse of museums is to enhance the awareness of people towards their living context and educating “people to become discriminating agents on their own part (Hein, 2000, p.xii).”

### **The Discourse of Museums Pivots The Meaning of Museums To Societies**

The discourse of museums can redefine the original functions or implications of objects inside museums. Religious images at religious sites are adorned with sacred value. Lay followers go to religious sites to worship these images for blessing, contemplation or introspection. However, the religious values of these images are redefined once they are inside museums. The Museum of Religion that was later renamed the Musée Guimet, is reputed for its rich storage of Southeast Asian religious images. However, inside the Musée Guimet, the images are adorned with new meaning. Inside the museum, visitors are to appreciate the cultural value and the grand ancient civilisations of the images. The religious images in the Musée Guimet are to enable visitors “to discover and appreciate the diverse cultures and civilizations of the continent of Asia (Prigent, 2004, back cover).”

The discourse of museums can change people’s mindset of certain events or issues. The Hiroshima Peace Museum and the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum are to speak critically of the use of atomic weapons and to honour the death of those victims who were killed by atomic bombs during the Second World War. The discourse of the two museums is to declare the importance of

peace. However, the advocate of the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere, the control of those conquered countries by Japan and the forcing of female into sex slavery by the Japanese armies during the Second World War are all hidden under this discourse of peace.

The discourse of the same museum can be changed or strengthened in accordance with the change of their temporal or spatial contexts. Four years after the French Revolution, the Louvre which was the former residence of some kings of France was opened to the French public. The discourse of the Louvre was to discrete monarchical rule and to use those former treasures of the French kings to arouse the pride of the French (Kenneth, 1996). Under Napoleon Bonaparte, the Louvre then became a place to show off the wealth and power of imperial France. Today, the Louvre has lost this political burden and has become one of the most visited museums in the world. Visitors visit the Louvre for its objects and its architecture.

Different from the discourse of the Louvre that changed in accordance with time, the discourse of the British Museum remains the same and up to a point strengthened in accordance with the evolution of time. The British Museum was founded in 1753. Since then, the British Museum has been adamantly upholding its mission which is for the use and benefit of

the public (Justin Morris, Head of Strategic Planning and Collections Services of the British Museum, personal communication, March 13, 2008). In accordance with Justin Morris, the discourse of the British Museum was an extension of Britishness, the idea of Enlightenment. He said that the museum was to let visitors understand their own cultural identities and their relations with the world. He also said that the British Museum was a reflection of the population of the United Kingdom. He remarked that to be British was to be multi-cultural and that by visiting the museum, British could understand that they were a part of the world. “We maintain a collection of things from the whole world that will be freely accessible to the people of the whole world. We try to interpret those principles for each new generation, but however much the details change, we remain true to the basic Enlightenment ideals,” said Neil MacGregor, the Director of the British Museum (cited in Smith, 2007, p. 15).

The discourse of museums can garnish similar objects with different meaning. In some art museums, art objects can be adorned with a discourse that is to provision; while in some museums, similar art objects can be accused of threatening the value or ideology of societies or countries. The Victoria and Albert Museum in London is a museum of designs and arts. Ever since the founding of the museum in the 19<sup>th</sup> century,

the museum has focused on modern decorative arts. The objects of the museum range from European to Asian arts; in particular those European arts between medieval and contemporary periods. The discourse of the museum is to provision (Helen Jones, Planning Manager of the Victoria and Albert Museum, personal communication, March 11, 2008). The Victoria and Albert Museum uses arts to arouse the interests of visitors in their search for knowledge and to engage the daily life of visitors to their search for arts. (Helen Jones, personal communication, March 11, 2008). However, the Nazis under Hitler considered modern arts; in particular those Impressionist and Expressionist damaged the German ideals (Gurian, 2006). Hence, they burned some of the arts (Gurian, 2006).

The discourse of museums can interpret the same objects from different perspectives. In 2008, the British Museum held a loan exhibition: *The First Emperor: China's Terracotta Army* between 13<sup>th</sup> September 2007 and 6<sup>th</sup> April 2008. The terracotta warriors were loaned abroad by the Museum of Terracotta Army and Cultural Relics Bureau of Shaanxi Province in Xi'an, China. On the official website of the museum, the exhibition was to "demonstrate the historical and archaeological context of these famous objects...a reassessment of the First Emperor himself ... unrivalled opportunity

to see these iconic examples of Chinese culture in the UK...to give the visitor a chance to understand China's past, its present and possible futures (British Museum, 2007)." The warriors were linked with the assessment of the First Emperor of China and a better understanding of China.

In 2012, to celebrate the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the return of sovereignty to the People's Republic of China, the Hong Kong Museum of History held a loaned exhibition which displayed the terracotta warriors. The exhibition was jointly held by the Hong Kong Museum of History and the Shaanxi Provincial Cultural Relics Bureau. The exhibition was named *The Majesty of All Under Heaven: The Eternal Realm of China's First Emperor*. On the welcome speech of the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services at the official website of the exhibition, the Director said that the exhibition was to "shed light on the development of the Qin dynasty in terms of both its material and spiritual values...to rethink the relationship between the conservation of cultural heritage and our modern life (The Hong Kong Museum of History, 2012)." The warriors were linked with the material and spiritual values of the Qin dynasty and the importance of the conservation of cultural heritage.

## The Discourse of Museums Expresses Different Ideologies

Following the path of museum development, the discourse of museums was expressions of ideologies. They were places to discourse the ideologies of elitism, nationalism and democracy. Museums were of the elites, for the nation and by the people. After all, the museum concept was a western ideology.

### a. Elitism

Museums were elitist institutions. The Florence-based Medici Family had laid the foundation that the museum concept was to express the interests of the elites. It was to display their great power and great wealth. During the Renaissance period, the Cabinets of Curiosity was to display the private collections of a group of new elites: a class of bourgeoisie which was well-represented by wealthy merchants, scholars, artists, aristocrats and physicians. They were keen to explore those “new, unknown or unseen, that needed to be integrated into the existing perception of the world (Proosler, cited in MacDonald, p.84).” They then stuffed the cabinets with rare objects such as shells, stones, skulls, bones, paintings and carvings. The discourse of the Cabinets was to liberate the bourgeoisie from the shackle of theology and to allow them to explore a new world of their own accord. The Cabinets were play

houses for these new elites to satisfy their search for leisure and excitement.

The Cabinets of Curiosity gradually evolved into spaces of specialisation. New ways of organising and ordering those collected objects started to emerge. The practice of collecting things became “a mark of status...for identifying and expressing social distinction (MacDonald, 2011, p.85).” Museums were places to display the collections of both the old bourgeoisie and the newly educated middle class; in particular those from the literary and philosophical societies. The practice of collecting specific things became a fashion. People became keen in collecting strange objects. In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Dutch collected tulip bulbs and in early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the French collected ancient medals caps (MacDonald, 2011). People were being judged for their good tastes, education and social status through those objects which they had collected (MacDonald, 2011).

The continuous advocate of rationality drove those countries with higher civilisation to uplift the civilisation of the lesser ones. The mission to mould a homogeneous society started to sprout in the mindset of these countries. Museums then became places of acquisitions. They were positioned with valuable objects which were “collected” from those countries of lesser civilisations. Museums were princely



galleries to focus on the physical and empiricism of their objects.

#### b. Nationalism

The Louvre is the world's first national museum (Newhouse, 2006). Four years after the French Revolution, the Louvre was open to the public. In 1803, the museum was renamed Musée Napoleon. The mission of the Louvre was to arouse nationalism (Marstine, 2006). To achieve this, visitors of the Louvre were shown what they should see and what they should know. The content of the catalogues and guidebooks of the Louvre were designed by curators of the museum to support the mission. The mindset of visitors towards their identity and that of their country were submitted to the didacticism of the Louvre.

Following the footprint of the Louvre, national museums became a common means among European countries to build patriotism and national identity. The Museum of Versailles and the Musée de Saint-Germain were designed to praise the national glory of France. The Bargello National Museum in Florence (1859) was established by the House of Savoy amid its progress of unifying Italy. The Berlin Museum of National Antiquities (1830) and the Germanic Museum of Nuremberg (1852) in the German States and those in the Scandinavian countries (Le Goff, 1992) followed a similar pattern of development. National museums gradually became city

pillars of countries in Europe and America (Cary, 1994). The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the flourishing of national museums worldwide (Smith, 2007).

To enhance nationalism of people towards their countries, museums; in particular national museums used different tactics. Some use the tactics of making certain objects or certain spots of time particular significant and representative. Some use the tactics of evading certain facts or details from the memory of people. Some use the tactics of dominating the memory of people with certain images or concepts. A tribute can be labelled a sign of friendship in a museum of the offered country or a sign of insult and loss of dignity of the offering country. Paintings could be considered as a national treasure in some museums and a device which is against national ideology in some museums. Both Hitler and Stalin had listed a list of acceptable and unacceptable western arts. Iran, after the Islamic revolution in 1979 banned the display of modern Western arts inside the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art for more than 20 years.

#### c. Democracy

Seeing that the enlightenment concept failed to bring equity to people and in addition to the fall of several monarchical countries in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, people began to doubt about the enlightenment concept and monarchical

rule. With respect museums, many started to criticise museums were storage places to preserve the physical value of objects. People began to advocate the discourse of museums had to be relevant to society and to involve communities' participations.

In 1974, the International Council of Museums stated the importance of the public role of museums was to serve and to develop societies (Weil, 1990). In 1992, the landmark report of the AMM, *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums* remarked that museums being important public institutions had to bear public responsibilities as well. The report stated that in a democratic society, museums had to have great inclusiveness. To support the concept of inclusiveness, in 2006, the British Museum in collaboration with the Bengali community in London organised the *Voices of Bengal season*. The massive sculpture of the Hindu goddess Durga which was constructed by the Bengali craftsmen was exhibited, worshipped, and eventually immersed and dismantled in the Thames River. The *Voices of Bengal season* became a living devotion (Smith, 2007). It became a ritual which is commonly practiced in South Asia.

Georges Henri Riviere (1897-1985) who was regarded as the father of eco-museum emphasised on the social responsibilities of museums. Museum scholars, Steven Weil suggested museums

had moved from being about something to being for somebody (Gurian, 2006). From the perspective of museum education, the interactive approach was developed as a counter response to the didactic approach which emphasised on one way communication. The interactive approach is to ask museums to interact with and to involve visitors' participation while they visit museums.

d. The museum concept was a western ideology

Needless to say, the museum concept was an occidental idea. In several occasions, the setting up of museums in non-occidental countries was to promote a Western ideology or to adapt this ideology to their political, social and cultural context. Throughout history, some non-occident countries regarded the adaptation of a museum concept as a yardstick to justify their cultural and civilisation standard against those of the West to free them from Western intervention or a tool to integrate their country.

In his unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Chen (2009) wrote that Siam's (today Thailand) adaptation of a museum concept was a counter-reaction to the threats of the Western powers to Siam. To avoid being colonised, Siam needed a museum to present the uniqueness and superiority of Siam civilisation to demarcate a civilised Siam from the uncivilised. In a book review of

*Possessors and Possessed: Museums, Archaeology, and the Visualization of History in the Late Ottoman Empire* that was written by Wendy Shaw, Ahmet (2004), the book reviewer remarked that the adaptation of the museum concept by the late Ottoman Empire was a strategic sign of the progress of the Ottoman Empire and the participation of the Empire in European culture.

### **The Discourse of Museums Tells The Contributions of Museums To Societies**

Stephen. E. Weil (2002) said that at least three quarters of those museums that are still active today were set up in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Museum administrators, museum scholars and international museums organizations saw the contributions of museums differently. Na Nakhomphanom, the former Director of the National Museum Bangkok said that the future strategy of the National Museum Bangkok was to strengthen its current royal collections by acquiring more objects which were related to Rama (king) VIII and Rama IX (the present king of Thailand), and to take care of national treasures and heritage (personal communication, February 26, 2008). Tomislav Šola (1997), a museum scholar defines “a museum is a non-profit institution...to increase the amount and quality of knowledge (p.285).” The ICOM defined a museum as “a non-profit making, permanent institution...for purposes of

study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment” (cited in Hein, 2000, p.2). In Canada, on the statement prepared by the National Museums of Canada for the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee cited in Stephen E. Weil (1990): “Museums collect... for the instruction and self-enlightenment of an audience (p.45).”

a. To protect and to preserve objects for generations

For long, museums were to express the power, the wealth and the interests of the past of their countries. Today, some museums still emphasizes on the importance to preserve these expressions. These objects are evidences, glory and pride of their inheritances. Museums have to protect the objects to show their mastery to the world (MacDonald, 2011). With respect to those masterpieces which are originated from other countries, some museums believe that it is their mission to act as guardians to protect the perfection and standard of excellence of these masterpieces. The Elgine Marbles which are inside the British Museum were originated from the Parthenon in Greek. The Marbles were removed from their original site in Greek by Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin, purchased by Britain in 1816 and ultimately placed in the British Museum. Britain and Greek have been long debating on whether the Marbles should be remained inside the British Museum or to be

returned to Greek. Defenders who supported the Marbles have to be returned to Greek claimed that Marbles were removed from Greek illegally and that Greek was the legitimate owner of the Marbles. Defenders who supported the Marbles have to be remained in the Museum claimed that the Marbles were better cared for in the Museum. They further claimed that it was quite unlikely that the Greece government could look after the Marbles owing to the fact that the Parthenon was a "ruin that can never now be restored (Hastings, 2005)."

b. To civilise and to rationalise civilians

The Louvre which was later renamed Musée Napoleon in 1803 was a tool to build citizenry of the French. With the expansion of the French empire under Napoleon, the collections of the museum increased tremendously. A profession of curators was then born to evaluate the worth of the objects and to make the Louvre the richest collection ever (Marstine, 2006). The discourse of the Louvre was to let the French realise that they were citizens of the most civilised and advanced country in the world of that time (Kenneth, 1996).

The emergence of the Age of Enlightenment was a response to a disordered world that was marked by the decline of patrimonial power, the rising bourgeoisie and rapidity of modernisation. The world was thought to be distorted by industrial and political revolutions:

(MacDonald, 2011). The revolutions had disrupted the tradition mode of power and control (MacDonald, 2011). The discourse of museums of the Age of Enlightenment was to use rationality to restore the disorder. Museums became a calculated space where taxonomy flourished. Different from the Cabinets of Curiosity which were stuffed with exotic objects, museums of the Enlightenment such as anthropology and ethnology classified objects in accordance with their chronology and territory (MacDonald, 2011). Natural science museums classified and calibrated objects into fauna and flora (MacDonald, 2011). Arts museums classified arts in terms of their period or civilisation or country of origin. Under this way of classification, visitors were expected to gain the knowledge of art through touring an art museum. Museums in general became institutions not only to discipline themselves; but to encourage people to self-regulate and to police themselves (MacDonald, 2011).

c. To generate income for the society

Museums are visitor attractions. Museums can generate income and contribute to the economy of societies. "The number of visits to major institutions (museums and galleries)...was over 42 million...suggest that Britain's leading museums and galleries are part of the mass visitor attraction business (Travers, 2006, pp34 – 35)." In the fiscal year of 2010, more

than 5.6 million visitors visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), nearly 780,000 visitors visited the Asian Civilisation Museum in Singapore (Singapore Government, 2011), and in accordance with a questionnaire which was filled in by Srithong Ruaythamroj, Management & Operation Site Manager of Rakluka Discovery in April 2012, more than one million visitors visited Yaowarat Chinatown Heritage Centre of Wat Trimit Wittayaram in Bangkok.

Museums look into ways to enhance their attractiveness for people to visit. Some museums are in the trend of upgrading their amenities and facilities such as exterior and interior design, signage, lightings, escalators, handrails and hand knobs. The renovation and expansion project of the neo-Palladian buildings of the National Museum of Singapore cost the museum 132 million Singaporean dollars (around USD105 million) (Lenzi, 2007). Some museums tied-in with business sector. F.A.O, a reputable high-end toy store in the United States of America sold plush toys versions which were featured in an exhibition organised by the museum in 1997: *Endangered! Exploring a World at Risk* (Dubin, 1999). Hugo Boss, a huge fashion brand sponsored exhibits and an annual prize which bore the name of Hugo Boss through the Guggenheim Museum. Morgan Stanley, a

multi-national financial service provider sponsored the temporal exhibition: *The First Emperor: China's Terracotta Army* of the British Museum. Today, museums integrate with digital techniques and marketing promotion to become visitor attractions to generate income for both museums and societies at large.

d. Museums are social service providers

Museums are learning centres. Museums have long been compared to libraries and universities for their educational roles. The British Museum as a learning centre is to encourage visitors to explore and to question the world and eventually to look into their relationship with the world. (Justin Morris, personal communication, March 13, 2008).

Museums are community centres. Some museums concern the well-being of communities. The Pacific Island Museum Association plays the role of a community centre hosts community events and feasts and provides health education and conflict resolution to local communities (Gurian, 2006). Museums are valves to reflect social concern. Some museums guide visitors to look into social issues such as family problems and sexuality. The Women's Museum of Aarhus in Denmark exhibits topics which are related to the history of obstetrics and gynecology, abortion and birth control (Marstine, 2006).

## CONCLUSION

Museums are social space to make people aware of, guide people, give people insights or ask people to look into their temporal and spatial contexts. It is quite clear that the discourse of museums is not neutral. The discourse of museums is designed to communicate to visitors a moment of truth in accordance with the accord of museums. The discourse of museums has the power to reflect the nature of the temporal and spatial contexts within which museums exists, to pivot the meaning of museums to societies, to express different ideologies of societies and eventually to label the contributions of museums to societies.

From the discourse of museums as princely galleries to the discourse of museums as custodies of valuable objects, and from the discourse of museums as citizenry molders to the discourse of museums as society servers, museums are to communicate the meaning of life to people.

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The discourse of museums can ask visitors to be aware of their immediate environment (MacDonald, 2011). They can reinforce the beliefs and build rationality of visitors as well. Despite the discourse of museums could be in contradiction or in agreement with the prior knowledge and experiences of visitors, it is to let visitors interpret, construct and compose their life.

Museums are dynamic and are transforming constantly. Picasso once said that “when (a painting) is finished, it goes on changing, according to the state of mind of whoever is looking at it. A picture lives a life like a living creature, undergoing the changes imposed on use by our life from day to day (cited in Dubin, 1999, p.12). The discourse of museums changes with time accordingly. As places of discourse, museums constantly redefine their discourse to influence people to look into or to define the meaning of life.

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