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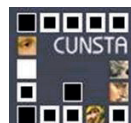
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Garthe Christopher J. (2022), *The Sustainable Museum. How Museums Contribute to the Great Transformation*, London: Routledge, 260 pp., <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003195207>>

Christopher Garthe's *The Sustainable Museum. How Museums Contribute to the Great Transformation* is a timely and remarkable voice in the ongoing debate on how cultural organisations can engage with the challenges of the Anthropocene, change themselves, and inspire others. His book demonstrates that sustainability in museums is not merely a question of technical improvements or carbon accounting. Instead, Garthe presents it as a multidimensional and systemic task – one that connects environmental concerns with social justice, new narratives on a colonial past, degrowth, and participatory practices. His approach is as progressive as it is pragmatic, combining impressive theoretical depth with concrete examples and actionable frameworks.

The book is organised into an introduction and three sections. Part I (*Museums and sustainability*) explores how sustainability can serve as a guiding principle for

museums, challenging the conventional notion of their neutrality and positioning them as agents of change. Part II (*Sustainable museum management*) elaborates on governance, leadership, and organisational processes, as well as the educational role of museums in sustainable development. Part III (*Putting sustainability into practice*), most applicable in its contribution, proposes a sustainability management in museums (SMM) model inspired by the idea of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Across these sections, Garthe highlights the necessity of perceiving museums as socially embedded players and knowledge brokers that can and must take a proactive role in shaping sustainable futures.

Part I sets the stage by situating museums within the complexities of the current era, characterised by wicked problems, climate risk, and inequality. Garthe carefully reconstructs the historical background of sustainability debates and provides a clear overview of the key ideas that shape the discourse in various fields, from environmental to social sciences. Interestingly, he is explicit in his criticism of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While

useful as an orientation, they fail to address global North-South asymmetries and fall short of advocating the radical reduction of resource use required for a genuine transformation. Instead, Garthe mentions alternative frameworks such as the doughnut model to explain “strong sustainability”, offering museums a way to link planetary boundaries with social justice. He conceptualises museums simultaneously as physical spaces and as alternative social arenas, with the capacity to function as multipliers of hope, frequently offering an oasis of personal space and calm in overcrowded cities. By doing so, he does not forget the possible blockbuster effect on museums when they become a tourist destination attracting millions of visitors. An awareness of potential risks marks the analysis he offers. This first section also addresses practical concerns, such as indoor air quality and emissions, but views them only as part of the problem. Concerns resulting solely from the care of collections are no longer sufficient. Sustainability is discussed as both an imperative and an opportunity for innovation, provided institutions are willing to overcome obstacles such as budgetary constraints.

Part II of the book shifts attention toward organisational dimensions, presenting sustainability as a leadership challenge that requires transformational governance, new skills, and new hierarchies. Strategic sustainability management, policy frameworks, and reporting standards emerge as necessary drivers for institutional change. Here, Garthe highlights the importance of mission statements, procurement policies, and resilience-building activities. Particularly notable is his engagement with the notion of degrowth, which, for example, he visualises in an illustration to contextualise collections, offering one of the rare translations of this critical concept

into the world of museums. The examples he provides are compelling – from the integration of indigenous knowledge in wood preservation to *in situ* protection approaches that rethink conservation and loans, Garthe illustrates how museums can learn from diverse ecological and social practices using the voices of experts. Discussions of financial sustainability and the evolving expectations of museums as areas of learning complement these reflections. Participatory practices emerge for the author as fundamental, with museums presented as co-creators with communities. Garthe examines co-design, co-curation, and citizen science as strategies for empowering both staff and visitors to function as agents of change, thereby bridging the persistent knowledge-behaviour gap that often weakens sustainability. While some ideas, including a democratic approach to defining the content of an exhibition, are still rare in practice, his suggestions are important guidelines for future-proof cultural organisations.

Part III is the book’s most significant contribution, since it calls for rapid application in museums. Building on insights from corporate social responsibility, Garthe introduces a comprehensive model of sustainability management in museums. This model is not limited to abstract principles but is operationalised through indicators, offered as modular systems, and practical steps that can be applied across various departments. He distinguishes between quantitative and qualitative indicators and provides valuable recommendations for their practical implementation. What stands out is his attention to organisational dynamics and resistance. Rather than prescribing utopian leaps, Garthe emphasises the value of microsteps – small, incremental evolutions that gradually shift institutional culture. He anticipates resistance to change as a natural part of the process and

presents strategies to navigate tensions, showing how milestones of change can be embedded within existing structures and make the transition visible for employees as well as other stakeholders in museum ecosystems. This pragmatic emphasis on gradualism and the slow pace of processes (even if intuitively they ought to be much faster to address accelerating threats to the climate) does not dilute the transformative ambition. On the contrary, it renders the vision more credible. By stressing the right balance between grassroots initiatives and top-down decision-making, Garthe illustrates how sustainability can take root at every organisational level, from the enthusiasm of individual staff members to managerial commitment. Ideally, this happens in constructive collaboration. Notably, he underscores the role of solution-oriented communication – an underestimated field in sustainability transition, not only in the cultural sector. Museums should not preach despair and catastrophe but cultivate agency and optimistic visions of the future. They can also combat disinformation.

The book's scope and intellectual agenda are impressive, ranging from new epistemologies in organisation studies, policy frameworks, and international debates to hands-on toolboxes and case studies contributed by practitioners. However, one challenge remains in that the sheer comprehensiveness of the agenda may overwhelm institutions. While Garthe's framework is visionary, a stronger sense of sequencing could help organisations better navigate the path toward change.

Nevertheless, this should not overshadow the book's extraordinary achievement. By combining systemic critique with constructive tools and by embedding ecological concerns within social and decolonial contexts, Garthe makes a compelling case for why museums must become drivers of the "great transformation."

I am writing this review while sitting in a museum café, accompanied by the background sounds of music and the quiet movement of visitors around me. This setting underscores Garthe's crucial point – museums are not only the custodians of collections but lived-in spaces of encounter, reflection, and opportunity. They are uniquely positioned to make sustainability tangible because of their roles and responsibilities, including their function as archives of industrialisation and of humanity's alienation from the more-than-human world. This can happen at various levels, through exhibitions, governance, and simple community building.

The Sustainable Museum is both an urgent call to action and a generous resource for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. Garthe's recommendations are ambitious yet grounded, radical yet pragmatic, idealistic yet necessary. By advocating for micro steps as well as systemic change, he demonstrates that the path toward sustainable museums is possible. Now it is time to put plans and recommendations into daily practice.

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