

**CREATIVITY IN MUSEUM ACTIVITIES: THE ROLE OF  
UNIVERSITY MUSEUMS IN ESTABLISHING A  
NEXT-GENERATION MUSEOLOGICAL MODEL**

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**ABSTRACT**

The University Museum, the University of Tokyo (UMUT) runs two experimental projects: *Mobilemuseum* and Intermediatheque. *Mobilemuseum* aims to introduce movement within museum collection by decentralizing it and displaying it throughout the city. Intermediatheque is a new museum that opened in March 2013 in a historic building in the centre of Tokyo; it is dedicated to experimenting with innovative interdisciplinary cultural making, fusing every possible means of expression. Both *Mobilemuseum* and Intermediatheque are designed to re-imagine museum creativity. This article deploys them as exemplars in a discussion of how contemporary museums can redefine their *raison d'être* to establish a next-generation museological model, particularly in the environment of a university museum.

**INTRODUCTION**

Within museum policy studies, *creativity* is the key to enhancing the social significance of museums in contemporary society. In their role as pilot research institutes for the sector, university museums must consider how to activate their collections creatively as well as stimulate the creativity of their communities. The University Museum, the University of Tokyo (UMUT) runs two experimental projects: *Mobilemuseum* and *Intermediatheque*. In this article, I introduce both projects and discuss ways in which they might influence a redefinition of today's museums' *raison d'être*. The establishment of a next-generation museological model with these projects as examples should be the core role of university museums, since they themselves are a research resource for the whole community.

## **KEY MUSEUM DATA OF UMUT**

The University Museum, the University of Tokyo (UMUT) was established in 1996 as the first university museum in Japan<sup>1</sup>. The history of UMUT goes back to 1966 and the foundation of the University Documentation Centre for Research Materials. Initially called *The University Museum*, in English, its main objective was to collect, classify and preserve natural, cultural and historical research materials in order to make them accessible for research. As such, it built a basis for the use and conservation of the university's collections. Once reorganized as the University Museum, it held exhibitions open to the general public, while also developing its research program.

UMUT's collection is the heart of everything it does. The University of Tokyo has accumulated since its foundation in 1877 more than 6,000,000 scientific specimens, half of which are in the University Museum. The UMUT collection is grouped into 3 fields and 17 categories: Geosciences (Mineralogy, Lithology and Petrology, Mining, Paleontology, Geography); Biology (Botany, Forest Botany, Pharmacy, Zoology, Aquatic Zoology, Anthropology and Prehistory, Medicine); and Cultural History (Archaeology, History of Architecture, Archaeological Arts, History of Fine Arts, Cultural Anthropology). There are currently 32 researchers based in the UMUT research department<sup>2</sup>.

The museum's goal is to develop original, innovative museum activities based on scientific specimens. UMUT pursues both academic research as an institution belonging to the University of Tokyo, and museum activities for the public. This is supported by fundamental research, i.e. curatorial work on scientific specimens, and applied research. Applied research involves exploring new ways to investigate scientific specimens in order to resolve complex contemporary issues, and also putting on experimental exhibitions and events governed by an innovative design ethic. Focusing on the latter, collaborative exhibitions, fashion shows and performing arts events are conducted under the general theme of *Art & Science*, which aims to bridge the two worlds of contemporary artistic expression and scientific specimens.

The 2008 exhibition *The Biosophia of Birds: an invitation to the Yamashina collection* is a good example of *Art & Science*<sup>3</sup>. Scientific specimens and material about birds were displayed in the context of the museum's artistic design policy. So in first gallery of the exhibition, *Bird in space* 1926 (1982 Cast), a sculpture by the Romanian-born sculptor Constantin Brâncuși, and an eggshell specimen of *Aepyornis*, which was the heaviest bird in the world, were juxtaposed to symbolize the marriage of *Art & Science*.

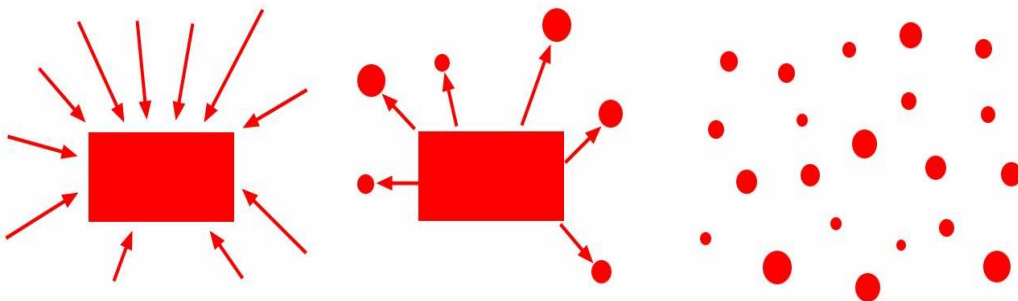
*Fantasma: Kate Rhode's Chamber of Specimens* in 2010<sup>4</sup>, was another example of the *Art & Science* theme. This exhibition provided a multi-educational program for students, who researched UMUT collection to

select exhibits, and helped Kate Rhodes, an Australian artist in residence, create artworks in response. The students also installed exhibits and guided visitors through the galleries. Original educational programs based on the experimental exhibitions gave students direct contact with scientific specimens and aspects of the museum's front of house and *behind-the-scenes* activities, as well as helping them to acquire practical museum knowledge.

### **THE MOBILEMUSEUM PROJECT**

*Mobilemuseum*, a research project for a next-generation museological model, is an extension of the experimental exhibitions. The concept was formulated in 2006 by Dr. Yoshiaki Nishino<sup>5</sup>. Commonly, museums function according to a centripetal vector, incorporating all their collected material into storage and inviting people to see the constituted collection in their galleries. In contrast *Mobilemuseum* aims to generate a centrifugal vector, mobilizing the collection by taking it outside the museum, displaying it throughout the city. This efficient, sustainable model is rooted in a fundamental concept: "From vast, centralized Museums to de-centralized *Mobilemuseums*".

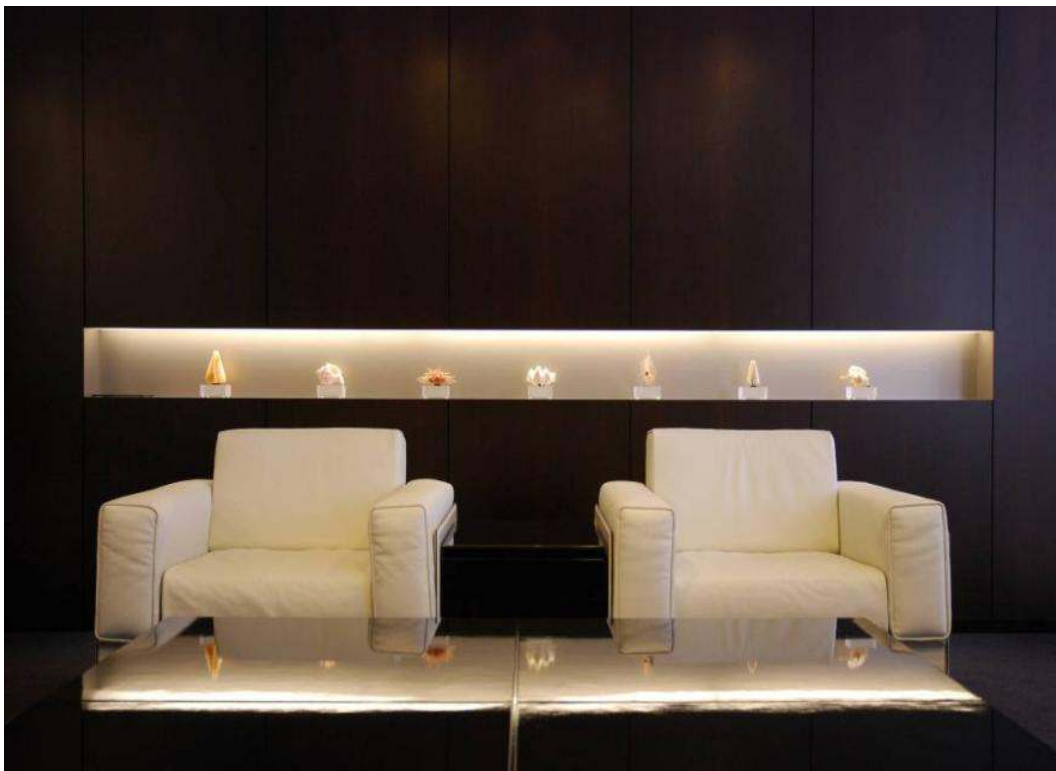
Fig.1 shows three schematic models of the museum. On the left, the *concentrated* model represents standard museum practice, as described above. In the centre, the *trans-border* model reverses the concentrated model. This is the vector that *Mobilemuseum* aspires to generate. Building on the concept of *Mobilemuseums*, we might envisage a future museum model, as on the right, the *ubiquitous* museum.



**Figure 1.** Schematic models of the museum (Image credit: UMUT)

The purpose of *Mobilemuseum* is to promote use of the museum collection by introducing mobility, and to create a next-generation museological model that is both efficient and sustainable. Commercial areas, offices and underpasses are transformed into museums by *Mobilemuseum* exhibition units. UMUT benefits by the project because it utilizes inactive collections and expands the scope of museum activities. In addition UMUT gains from the experience of putting on experimental exhibitions and exploring new research fields in museum studies and museum design.

Since the project began in 2006, more than 80 *Mobilemuseum* exhibitions have been developed, nationally and internationally, in offices, educational institutions and via academic networks. A typical project is an academia /business collaboration between UMUT and a real-estate company to hold a series of exhibitions in an office lobby (Fig. 2-3). Exhibit materials are selected according to their physical robustness and their aesthetic design qualities. They are renewed twice a year and the project itself changes every three years.



**Figure 2.** *Mobilemuseum* in a reception room in the main building of the real-estate company, in Minami-aoyama, Tokyo. (Photo credit: UMUT)



**Figure 3.** *Mobilemuseum* in an office lobby in Akasaka, Tokyo. The exhibition consists of three stand-alone cases and one large case with an historical steel shelf from the UMUT collection. (Photo credit: UMUT)

**Table 1.** Visitor survey in Akasaka office lobby, Tokyo

Date / Days	N. of Responses	N. of Interviewers	Response Rate	Interview Time (Mode)
2007, Jan. / 6 Days	80	5	—	—
2007, Oct.-Nov. / 7 Days	91	3	40.1%	4 min.
2008, Feb. / 5 Days	81	3	50.6%	4 min.
2008, Aug. / 5 Days	194	6	51.3%	5 min.
2009, Feb. / 5 Days	181	6	49.1%	4 min.
2009, Sep. / 7 Days	249	8	54.1%	5 min.
35 Days in Total	876	31	49.0%	4 min.

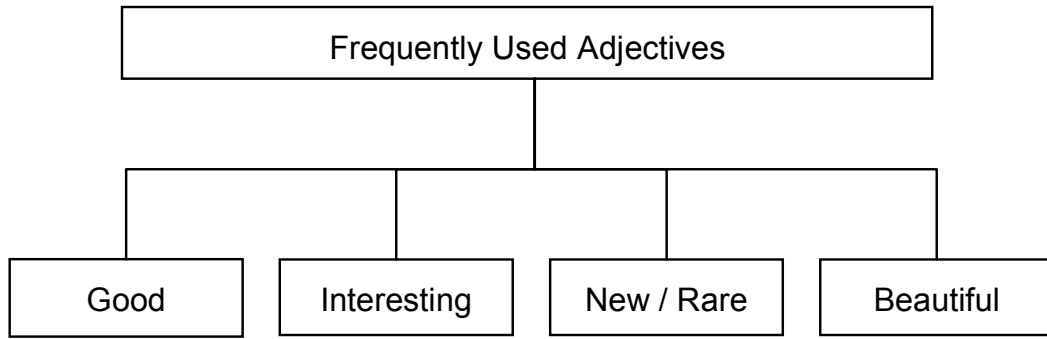
**Table 2.** Occupation

	N	%
Office Worker	799	91.2%
Other Occupation	55	6.3%
Housewife	10	1.1%
Student	6	0.7%
Retired	3	0.3%
No Answer	3	0.3%
Total	876	100.0%

During the first phase of the project, 2007 – 2009, I conducted visitor research interviews in the exhibition space each time the exhibits were renewed, to examine *Mobilemuseum's* social impact (Table 1). In terms of occupation, more than 90% of visitors described themselves as “office workers” (Table 2). Most respondents came during working hours and visited the exhibition without prior intent (Table 3). This is quite different from normal museum visitors who are usually motivated to see exhibitions. I used text analysis on frequently used adjectives in the responses to an open-ended question in order to classify visitors' thoughts about *Mobilemuseum*. The resulting tendency is shown in Fig. 4. The most frequent adjective was “Good”. Another common adjective was “Interesting”. “New / Rare” and “Beautiful” were also frequent. These keywords suggest visitors' surprise and aesthetic appreciation, plus a favorable impression overall. They might also indicate that *Mobilemuseum* generates new meaning in the mind of visitors. *Mobilemuseum* thus contributes to the creation of new cultural values and expands access opportunities to a university museum collection and its research, beyond its benefits to the university museum itself.

**Table 3.** Purpose of visit

	N	%
To work in the building	289	33.0%
To visit the office in the building	381	43.5%
To see <i>Mobilemuseum</i>	15	1.7%
To visit the café or restaurant in the building	57	6.5%
To use the lobby for rest or meetings	57	6.5%
By chance (visit nearby buildings)	39	4.5%
Others	33	3.8%
Unknown	5	0.6%
Total	876	100.0%



**Figure 4.** Thoughts about *Mobilemuseum*

### INTERMEDIATHEQUE<sup>6</sup>

Intermediatheque is a new museum dedicated to interdisciplinary experimentation and creation based on fusing means of expression. The second and third floors of the former Tokyo Central Post Office, an historic five-storey building representative of *Showa* modernism designed by Tetsuro Yoshida in 1931, were renovated as the birthplace of Intermediatheque (Fig. 5), which opened on March 21, 2013. It is jointly operated by Japan Post Co. Ltd. and UMUT as an Industry & Academia Project.



**Figure 5.** Overview of Intermediatheque, in the Marunouchi district in front of Tokyo station.



The word *museum* does not appear in Intermediatheque's title because its unique design policy distinguishes it from prevailing museum norms. In the permanent exhibition "*MADE in UMUT: The University of Tokyo Collection*"<sup>7</sup>, the design aims to revivify the heritage of UMUT collections in the context of the contemporary urban cityscape (Fig. 6). In a process we call ReDESIGN<sup>8</sup>, UMUT have collected as much historical heritage as possible, including prewar wooden furniture, and modified the objects for today's needs.



**Figure 6.** View of Intermediatheque 2F permanent exhibition (Photo & design credit: UMUT)

The special exhibition, *Anthropometria: Mode & Science III* by Naoki Takizawa, takes the same approach<sup>9</sup> (Fig. 7). Originally a *Mobilemuseum* project, it was redesigned and extended for Intermediatheque. The exhibition was first seen at the Koishikawa Annex in October 2010. In 2011 it was transferred to the atrium of the university library at the National Taiwan University in Taipei, the exhibition space being formed by new L-shaped white walls. The next version, held at the Musée des Tissus in Lyon in 2011-2012, was scaled up to include a tribute to French modern artist Yves Klein. And now, having been developed through these various editions, it appears in 2013 as one of opening special exhibitions and incorporates collections relating to UMUT's scientific heritage.

Two more special exhibitions were set up for Intermediatheque's opening, presenting the outcome of ongoing scientific research as well as artistic expression, in harmony with the permanent exhibition. *IMT in construction*





**Figure 7.** View of Intermediatheque special exhibition “*Anthropometria: Mode & Science III* by Naoki Takizawa” (Photo & design credit: UMUT)

juxtaposes images of the Tokyo Central Post Office building in 1930s with those of the present day<sup>10</sup>. Some of the old steel window frames are reincarnated as exhibition furniture through the ReDESIGN process. *Cosmographia* highlights the correlation between celestial images produced by cutting edge planetary science and modern abstract painting<sup>11</sup>.

Intermediatheque’s unique features include a new and comprehensive education program designed to stimulate creativity. A lecture theater was allocated as the core site for *IMT College*, an experimental program of adult and school education (Fig. 8). A University of Tokyo seminar series is now underway and this summer young science academics gave a series of public lectures. The plan is to develop a rich and varied program of lectures, seminars and workshops in conjunction with our exhibition activities. Thus, Intermediatheque hopes to become a 21<sup>st</sup> century center for new cultural creation.



**Figure 8.** View of the lecture theater in Intermediatheque (Photo & design credit: UMUT)

## DISCUSSION

I have highlighted two UMUT experimental projects, *Mobilemuseum* and Intermediatheque. These projects have a design policy that reconsiders and emphasizes the significance of *creativity* in museums. The benefits of the *Mobilemuseum* model can be explored by research, while Intermediatheque is newborn, so it will be interesting to follow its progress.

*Mobilemuseum* facilitates the use of museum collections by mobilizing them in the service of an efficient, sustainable, next-generation museological model. So, how does *Mobilemuseum* benefit the University Museum? Firstly, it activates dormant collections, secondly, it accumulates reusable exhibition units, and thirdly, it explores new research fields for museum studies or museum design to create experimental exhibitions. In summary, *Mobilemuseum* expands the scope of museum activity.

Visitor survey results show two observable social effects from *Mobilemuseum*. Firstly, it provides new access opportunities to museum collections and exhibitions for people who are not usually motivated to go and see them. The second effect is that *Mobilemuseum* generates new meaning within the exhibition spaces by transforming a non-museum space into a

temporary museum space. These two effects suggest that people could enjoy university museums more if they adopted some of *Mobilemuseum*'s practice and ethos.

If *Mobilemuseum* were recognized as a model for other museums, it could contribute to their capacity to make their activities more creative, and consequentially could stimulate people's creativity. So we could argue that *Mobilemuseum* is potentially a useful model for contemporary museum culture. One avenue for future research as *Mobilemuseum* develops is to establish a *Mobilemuseum* Method as a widely applicable museological model. The growing bank of case studies of successful projects available for evaluation and analysis could further extend the effective use of university museum collections.

Finally, I wish to identify the role of university museums as pilot research institutions for the stimulus of creativity in museums. *Mobilemuseum* is spreading abroad and gaining a reputation as a cutting edge research project for a new, network-type museological model. Just like the idea of *Mobilemuseum* itself, we need to think outside the box to explore the potential of museums beyond their physical constraints. University museums have the particular advantage of being able to draw on the expertise of staff throughout the university. It is vital to foster these links and to encourage the interaction of academics beyond the confines of their specific research in order to encourage experimental projects, which can feed into the work of other museums. As we all know, younger generations are the future of museums. So it behooves university museums as institution of higher education to foster highly qualified museum talent.

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