



REVIEW

Museums as laboratories for the future: a review of *Cultivating Futures Thinking in Museums*

Reviewed Book

Alford, K. (Ed.). (2025).
Cultivating Futures Thinking in Museums.
Routledge

Reviewed by

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Abstract

This review examines *Cultivating Futures Thinking in Museums*, a new collection of case studies edited by Kristen Alford. The book presents a diverse range of global examples – from the Museum of the Future in Dubai to the District Six Museum in Cape Town – illustrating how museums can cultivate “futures literacy” among visitors and communities. The anthology highlights creative approaches to navigating uncertainty, climate challenges, and social inequities, positioning museums as active participants in shaping collective futures. Particularly relevant for science communication audiences, the book showcases how science centers and museums are evolving beyond traditional roles, engaging in meaningful dialogue, and fostering proactive approaches to global challenges.

Keywords

Decolonising science communication; Dewesternising science communication; Science centres and museums

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1 - Introduction

Museums have traditionally focused on collections, exhibitions, and the preservation of heritage. Recently, however, many institutions have begun to explore more future-oriented perspectives — mobilizing their cultural, educational, and scientific resources to engage visitors in imagining possible futures. *Cultivating Futures Thinking in Museums*, edited by Kristen Alford, delves into this shift by offering an array of global case studies that highlight how museums can foster futures literacy, broaden visitors' horizons, and be active participants in societal transformation.

2 - Outline of the book

Comprising chapters from institutions around the world, the anthology includes both newly established “futures-oriented” museums (such as Dubai’s Museum of the Future and the Futurium in Berlin) as well as older, more traditional venues like the Science Museum in London and the Exploratorium in San Francisco. With a strong focus on science museums and science centers, the book highlights how these institutions, alongside others, conceptualize and enact futures thinking.

The first section frames the notion that museums can shape public discourse about what the future holds, from technological shifts to social transformations, and enhance the future literacy of their visitors. It provides a clear and accessible overview of what futures thinking entails, why it is relevant to museums, and how it can be effectively integrated into institutional practices.

The main body consists of 21 case studies, each focusing on a particular institution or project, with a broad global reach. Examples range from the Anchorage Museum’s climate change program to the District Six Museum’s decolonial approach to the future. These spotlights illustrate diverse strategies for helping audiences confront uncertainty and explore alternative futures.

The final section reflects on how futures thinking influences museums themselves, prompting considerations about their evolving roles, governance structures, and long-term sustainability.

3 - Global perspectives on futures thinking

The book brings in perspectives from South Africa, Colombia, Mexico, Germany, Finland, Singapore, and beyond. This international reach is invaluable in showcasing multiple cultural lenses — emphasizing that futures literacy is not limited to a Western, technologically driven paradigm. Views from South Africa (the District Six Museum) and Colombia (Parque Explora) are particularly interesting, as they illustrate how futures thinking manifests in non-Western contexts and reveal what “decolonizing the future” means, particularly given the pervasive, global influence of Western media and science fiction. Together, the case studies underscore the importance of heritage, communal storytelling, and cultural specificity in futures-oriented museum practices and strategies, in places as different as Berlin and Rio de Janeiro.

4 · Engaging audiences in futures-oriented practices

Several chapters highlight museums' ability to break down traditional barriers to knowledge by engaging communities directly in futures thinking. One of the recurring takeaways is that preparing and guiding people to think about the future is not solely the domain of experts, academics, or research institutions; museums, too, share the responsibility of helping communities and society learn, anticipate challenges, and shape more resilient visions of tomorrow. The Anchorage Museum's climate initiatives illustrate how a museum can serve as a collaborative space for preparing communities for impending environmental shifts. The Climate Museum goes further by emphasizing that climate is a threat to every future — so rather than just relaying facts, it focuses on mobilizing agency, collective problem-solving, and grassroots initiatives. This shift ensures that audiences aren't merely aware of climate issues but feel empowered to help drive meaningful change and to actively prepare the futures they want.

The book holds significant value for science museum professionals, extending beyond the realm of futures thinking to offer broader insights into exhibition design, audience engagement, and institutional adaptation. Some chapters, such as those from ACMI (Melbourne), the Science Museum (London), and ArtScience Museum (Singapore) provide concise yet insightful overviews of exhibition development processes and the rationale behind their futures-oriented approaches. The chapter about Dubai's Museum of the Future provides a compelling view of the future of immersive trends in museums, demonstrating how digital technology and interactive environments can reshape visitor engagement and redefine the museum experience. These sections offer valuable glimpses into how institutions conceptualize and implement their visions, though at times, a more detailed analysis of their methodologies would have further enriched the discussion. In other chapters, Brooke Ferguson and Kristen Alford have done an admirable job in compiling interviews that document the diverse ways in which museums in the Philippines and Mexico are engaging with futures thinking.

5 · Futures thinking and museum structures

While the book's breadth is a strength, its heterogeneity sometimes results in uneven depth. Some chapters offer primarily high-level overviews, leaving readers wanting more substantial discussions on methodologies, institutional challenges, and the tangible impacts of futures thinking. Occasionally, the discussions feel somewhat detached from the urgent structural challenges museums face today. In *Museums and Societal Collapse* [Janes, 2023], Robert Janes argues that museums must engage more directly with systemic crises. Futures thinking presents a powerful avenue for reinforcing museums as catalysts for social and environmental resilience, yet this book does not fully explore its transformative potential. While the final chapter hints at these possibilities, a more in-depth discussion of the institutional implications of futures-oriented work would have strengthened the volume.

Given the range of contributions, the trade-off between breadth and depth is understandable. However, few chapters explore how governance and leadership might be reconfigured to embed futures thinking beyond the short-term scope of a single exhibition. If museums aspire to play crucial social roles — whether addressing climate change, decolonization, or social justice — they must ensure that their governance structures align with the societal

challenges they aim to tackle. As argued in *Museum Activism* [Janes & Sandell, 2019], institutions that seek to drive change must critically examine their own leadership models, financial dependencies, and decision-making processes to avoid perpetuating the same inequities they seek to address. Alford acknowledges these challenges in the concluding chapter, framing the book as an invitation for further exploration and discussion on how museums can navigate these complexities while embracing futures thinking.

6 • Conclusion

The overarching message of the book is that futures literacy — learning to anticipate and engage with uncertainty — can be integrated into how science museums construct exhibitions and public programming. Whether through interactive scenario-building (Futurium in Germany), climate dialogues (Anchorage Museum), or digital immersions (Dubai’s Museum of the Future), the case studies illustrate that museums can be laboratories for large-scale social imagination. By exploring new ways to help communities “learn, unlearn, and relearn”, museums foster a sense of agency and broader civic participation in shaping tomorrow.

Cultivating Futures Thinking in Museums is an inspiring collection, demonstrating museums’ potential to spark imagination and collective action around issues such as climate change, social justice, and cultural identity. Each chapter presents valuable experiments and conceptual frameworks, making the book a compelling resource for museum professionals, science communicators, and educators alike. Alford’s compilation underscores a critical shift: museums, once seen as custodians of the past, are increasingly becoming platforms for communities to co-create resilient and hopeful futures.

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About the author

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