

At Museums, Maybe It's Time for 'De-growth'



At the Verbier Art Summit in January, from left, Beatrix Ruf, director of the Stedelijk Museum, Prince Constantijn of the Netherlands and Rem Koolhaas, the architect. The conference examined what may be lost when museums and attendance get larger.

FREDERIK JACOBOWITS PHOTOGRAPHY

By NINA SIEGAL

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AMSTERDAM — The last quarter of a century has been a period of pronounced growth in the cultural sector, with the rumble of jackhammers creating the soundtrack to 21st-century museum life. New buildings, multimillion-dollar expansions, new wings and collection growth have all helped drive visitor numbers to unprecedented heights.

So it seemed a little counterintuitive when Beatrix Ruf, the director of the [Stedelijk Museum](#) of contemporary and modern art and design in Amsterdam, called for a forum on the possible value of “de-growth” of the 21st-century museum.

“Size Matters!” was the theme of the inaugural [Verbier Art Summit](#) in Switzerland in late January, hosted by Ms. Ruf and the art collector Anneliek Sijbrandij. The

meeting was a gathering of about 100 cultural leaders and thinkers, like the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, the British-German performance artist Tino Sehgal, the British artist Christopher Kulendran Thomas and Prof. Benjamin H. Bratton.

“De-growth” is a concept borrowed from economics. It is associated with an anticonsumerist and anticapitalist approach to sustainable development — the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as “decrease in mass of an organism especially at the end of a prolonged period of growth.”

Ms. Ruf, a German curator who has worked at both small and large contemporary art institutions, now works in Amsterdam, which has seen the direct benefits of an expanding museum sector. Most of its major institutions around the central Museumplein (Museum Square) have increased their footprint in recent years.



These changes have driven a shift in the city’s global profile from one dominated by sex and drugs (the famous red light district and legal marijuana shops) toward a focus on Rembrandt, Vermeer, Mondrian and van Gogh.

The Dutch national museum, [the Rijksmuseum](#), reopened in 2013 [after a 10-year \\$406 million renovation](#) and expansion, and [the Van Gogh Museum](#), next door to the Stedelijk, last year opened a new entrance hall on Museumplein, which allows improved access for the long lines of visitors waiting to enter the new wing, built in 1999.

The Stedelijk went through [its own \\$159 million expansion](#) from 2004 to 2012, but is now exploring internal questions about the best direction for its future growth — whether that will be in collection development, audience development or some other area, Ms. Ruf said.

But instead of always thinking about development, the idea of “de-growth” also deserves some consideration, Ms. Ruf said. “Whenever there is a quest for growing, sizing up, the questions of architectural sizing up as well, there is the question of what qualities we gain and what qualities are we in danger to lose,” she said in her opening remarks at the Verbier Art Summit.

Within her own institution, for example, the Stedelijk's marketing department was mulling ways to increase the number of international visitors, who account for around 35 percent of the museum's admissions, with the remaining 65 percent Dutch locals.

"We always want as many people to see our exhibitions as possible," she said in a telephone interview, "but when we think specifically in terms of ticket buyers, that might have an impact on the decisions we make about quality."

Dakis Joannou, the Greek Cypriot industrialist and art collector, [who founded the DESTE](#) nonprofit contemporary art foundation in 1983, moved it into its first public space in a former paper factory near Athens in 1998, and then moved it into an even larger space, a former sock factory, in 2006. In recent years, Mr. Joannou has collaborated with other institutions, like [the Museum of Cycladic Art](#) and [the Benaki Museum](#) in Athens, to create exhibitions rather than to continue to grow his own space. He has decided that it is better for him to downsize to no museum at all, he said.

"My model is 100 percent flexibility, not to be tied down, and do a show whenever you have a good plan," he said in a telephone interview. "You find the space and you do the show. You have a program to do two to four shows a year, but you do them wherever you find the right space."

He added that the size of a museum is not as important as its scale, or rather its size in relation to its contents, or context. A museum that is no bigger than a shoe box can have more impact than a sprawling museum, Mr. Joannou said, if what is on show has resonance.

"Art has become very popular now, and most museums need more space," he said. "De-growth only happens in the private museums, and that's for a very specific reason: the lack of enough funds to endow a museum to last forever. You may do very well, but at some point you just stop out of a lack of will to go on with it."

Nobody at the summit seemed to suggest downsizing public museums, or dismantling new wings or anything of that sort, but a lot of the participants talked about refocusing the energies of museum staffs to explore making the museum experience deeper, rather than broader, Ms. Ruf said.



“All museums are adding restaurants, shops and things that are not about the core activity of a museum, but that are places that people want to gather,” she said. “But what if we also engage them in the public place, which is a place of encounters, disruption, learning and quality exchanges?”

Among the conclusions arrived at by those at the summit, compiled by the London-based art critic John Slyce, were these: “A palpable degree of ‘gigantomania’ has mirrored the processes of globalization since the 1990s,” and “as institutions have ‘grown’ the intellectual ambitions and abilities of those who fill those institutions have not kept pace.”

But on a more optimistic note, the report concludes, the growth of museums has nurtured a lot more interest in art among the public, and the importance of art and the museum as a place for community “is as great or greater now than ever before.”

As a result, “art itself really provides the strategies and approaches we need to consider and adopt in relation to growth: slow down, think more.”

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