

A Response: Exhibiting Energy in 2075

Energy humanities have transformed the contour of energy research by redirecting it away from the conventional preoccupation with technology, innovation and market to culture, values and visions. Notwithstanding, it is difficult to determine if energy humanities have made any impact on the material reality and politics of energy, changing our future course. Of course, an obsession with tangible impact can often do more harm than good, especially for the humanities discipline, but if energy humanities aim to deliver more than academic critique of energy-intensive society, we must think about how to move beyond academia.

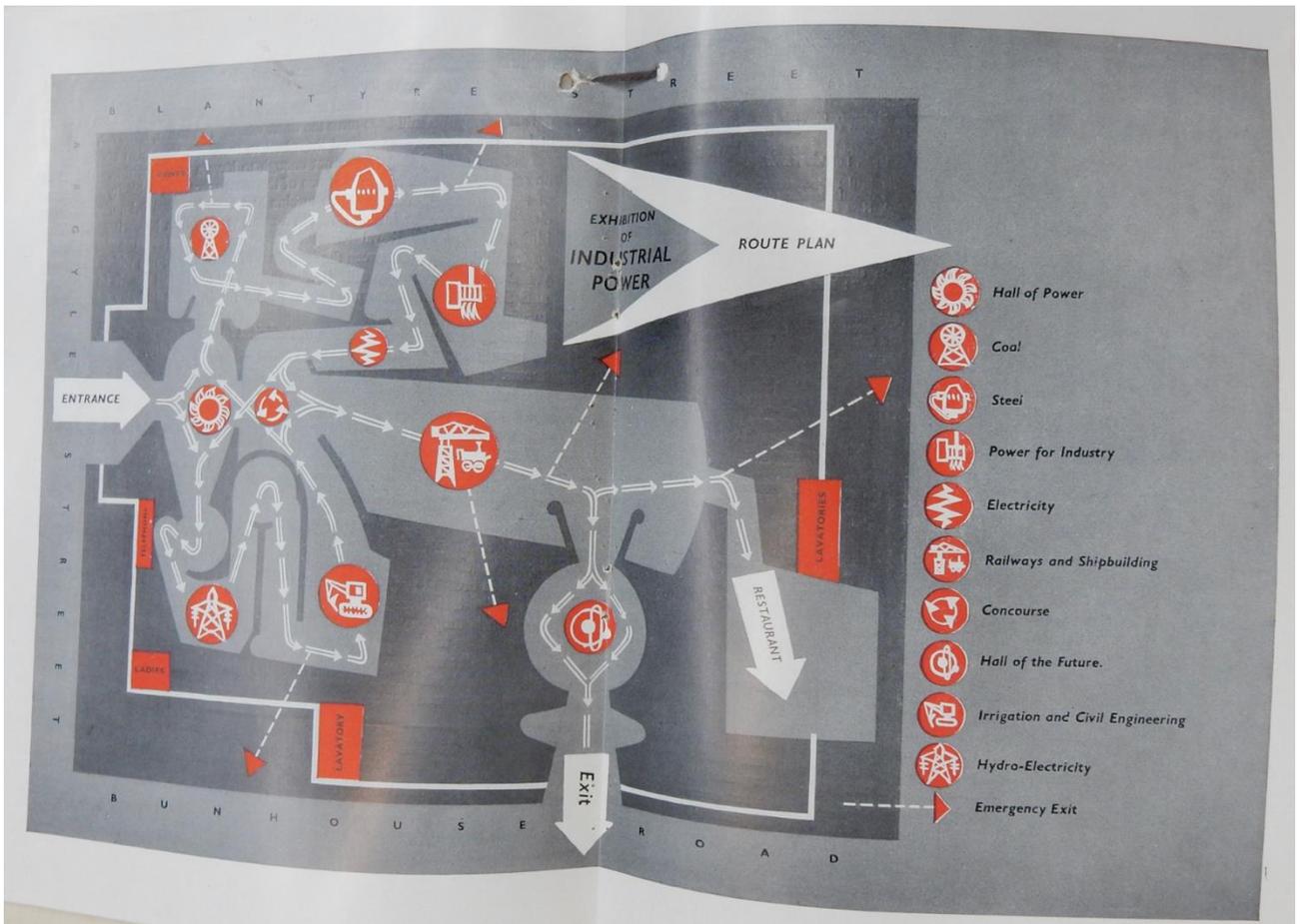
As a way to envisage the next steps for energy humanities, I will discuss the museum as an extra-academic field that could offer a good place for us to take a (modest) next step. This might not particularly sound like a radical departure from the conventional academic practice—I am sure many academic colleagues have been involved in exhibitions or museum events as advisers, organisers or creators. Still, energy humanities scholars have lot more to offer to the museum sector and, by doing so, energy humanities can probably enhance its capacity to create cultural change as a way to address the present energy challenge.

In her book *Living Oil* (2013), Stephanie LeMenager identifies museums as sites where the culture of modern energy—in particular, petroculture—manifest itself. More than that, museums are constitutive of future reality. As LeMenager writes, ‘Every museum makes a statement about the future, about what kind of past will sustain it.’ If so, can we imagine our energy future *through* a museum exhibition?

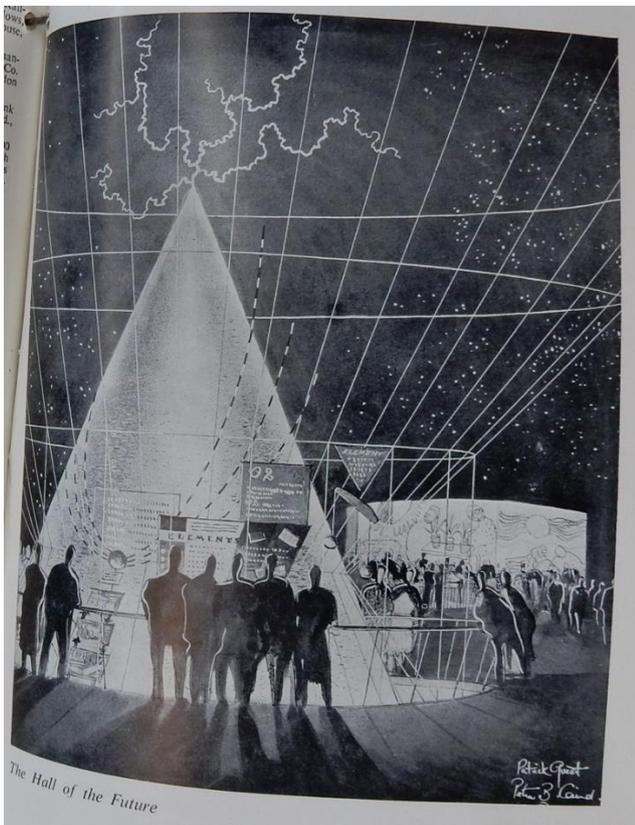
As an experiment, let us envisage the content of a putative exhibition set in the year 2075. In this exhibition, we look back on the changes (or changes that never happened) in the global energy system in the early 21st century, as well as their consequences. Will there be one or more fantastic inventions that have saved the humanities from the worst of the climate crisis? Will there be a substantial scaling up of existing technology (as of 2022) such as carbon capture and storage (CCS), micro modular nuclear reactors or clean hydrogen, which eventually solve the problem caused by humans’ intensive carbon emission? Museum curators would love to have such star objects and positive narratives of human ingenuity. However, there is the opposite possibility, too, the case of climate doom, which is actually more likely happen. In the world of extreme climate change, what sort of objects would we exhibit? Memorabilia from failed international conventions, videos of climate change deniers, oil companies’ publicity materials saying that we can keep burning fossil fuel?

What would be the narrative line of our future exhibition? Are we to talk about the epic story of successful climate change response through rapid decarbonisation or a tragic tale of failed international cooperation and market fixes? There is no need to stick to a single narrative, as we can choose multiple-track narratives such as the one adopted by the Industrial Power Exhibition held in Glasgow (as part of the Festival of Britain) in 1951. The Glasgow exhibition, designed by the BBC broadcaster Alastair Borthwick and the architect Basil Spence, was an interesting attempt to express the distinctive histories and characters of two energy landscapes in England and Scotland while offering the sense of a common future for the two nations (and their energy economies). The exhibition included dual stories of Britain’s coal and Scottish hydropower, physically represented by two visitor routes at the exhibition site. One could follow the coal route and see the celebratory story of Britain’s coal-powered industrialisation. The hydropower sequence showed how the Scottish lochs supplied power for the Scottish economy and society. The two routes converged in the Hall of Future, where the future was pictured as a combination of a large dome—90 feet in diameter—adorned with many small twinkling lights and a metal cone on the floor, from which ‘flashes of a million-volt lightning crackle upwards to the dome.’¹ This was an artistic rendition of a nuclear future; for many scientists and politicians at the time, nuclear power held the promise of an almost unlimited and clean source of energy.

¹ *The Times*, 25 May 1951.



A map of exhibition floor, Industrial Power Exhibition, Glasgow, 1951.
 Source: *Exhibition of Industrial Power* (London, HMSO, 1951).



The Hall of the Future, Industrial Power exhibition.

Source: *Exhibition of Industrial Power* (London, HMSO, 1951).

A two-track design, similar to the Glasgow exhibition, is certainly an option for our 2075 exhibition. But will we then be fortunate enough to tell triumphant parallel stories of the rise of renewable energy and the demise of fossil fuel? Perhaps it is more likely that we will be talking about the story of renewable transition, as well as the story of failed decarbonisation. We might be recounting technological breakthroughs and the fact that some regions of the world have (in 2075) become uninhabitable for human beings. We might be contrasting the prolonged battle between the climate apocalypse and climate change denial.

Then there is the question of the future: Will we, in 2075, have a single vision of the future—just like the nuclear future vision of the 1951 Glasgow exhibition? Will the future generation have an overarching future vision of a hopeful technological future or that of climate doom? If we are heading for an inevitable climate catastrophe, will we stop imagining the future altogether? In that case, do we need to have a future vision after all? We know that the dream of atomic power has been fulfilled only partially and with much more grave repercussions than many scientists predicted. Yet, as any museum practitioners would probably tell you, we still need to present a positive future because it is difficult to attract an audience (and funding) to exhibitions devoid of positive messages. If that is the case, we could soon be witnessing the death of energy exhibitions—how can it be possible to tell a positive story about energy when it becomes clear that a climate breakdown is inevitable? Will we be hiding energy from public view, just as we did with tobacco (tobacco, once ubiquitous in modern culture scene, with its producers acting as patrons of numerous cultural events, is largely erased from public culture, although it has hardly disappeared from our society)?

Energy exhibitions are, in fact, already under threat. The steam engine, electric illumination, self-combustion engine and nuclear science once held the pride of place in many museums across the world. The conventional technological triumphalism is increasingly become at odds with the narratives of climate emergency and societal decarbonisation, as the new technological narratives attribute the origin of the current ecological crisis to human civilisation and human use of fossil fuels. More immediately, there is a growing public scrutiny about the financial ties between museums and the energy (chiefly fossil fuel) industry. The oil industry has long been acting as a wealthy patron of culture in capitalist society. With the pressure from climate activists, an increasing number of museums and galleries have severed ties with the fossil fuel industry, but mounting an energy exhibition without a connection with this industry is not easy, if not impossible. Not only do museums depend on the energy industry for financing energy exhibitions, but objects and information featured in the exhibition usually come from the industry. Here, we might still be trapped in the entrenched capitalistic thinking. If museums are freed from the capitalistic mode of cultural production, then we can do away with the concerns about funding stream and public censure for the fossil fuel connection.

There are some community-based or bottom-up climate change exhibitions that are free from any fossil fuel connection and rigid institutional structure (although not entirely from funding concerns). Would our 2075 exhibition benefit from any non-capitalistic mode of cultural system, such as by funding from a socially responsible energy industry or citizens? Another possibility is that energy exhibitions might disappear in the future due to the lack of funding or public disillusionment about any hopeful vision of the energy future. Thinking about the future of energy exhibitions thus involves imagining the future of culture production. It also illuminates how our present cultural expressions about energy in the 2020s might be constrained by the economic and social systems under which the fossil fuel industry's financial, material and cultural possessions are protected.

Turning back to the present, what sort of stories should energy exhibitions in the 2020s be telling? If exhibitions are our statements about the future, what sort of statements are we making? Are energy humanities scholars, with their expertise in culture, values and visions, able to take part in making a cultural statement about the future? Museums and the cultural domain might not be the end point of energy humanities' intervention into the shaping of energy futures, but engaging more fully

with cultural sites could be a first step to embark upon a praxis-oriented phase for energy humanities, a step for the field to become a driver for the cultural change that we desperately need over the coming years.