

# The Museum of Capitalism

An Oakland pop-up project exhibits the economy

Bernard Marszalek

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The Museum of Capitalism (MOC), in Oakland, California, was a provocation not solely for being situated in the Jack London waterfront district, a gentrified marina area, but also for occupying a white elephant of a building erected just as the entire US economy collapsed.

The so-called Great Recession of 2007 could just as appropriately be called the Great Economic Coma, and the capacious future food market that the Museum reclaimed for its quarters, stands as the unintended main exhibit—a cadaver of capitalism.

As a pop-up venture, the Museum had a short life, certainly shorter than capitalism. It closed in mid-August, however its ephemeral status belies its conceptual scope and physical expanse. The Museum's 13,000 sq ft facilitated an extensive and varied exhibition, from a dozen tablecloth size banners depicting the logos of defunct banks suspended over the atrium, to minute dioramas that referred to the slave trade in Philadelphia.

And, from systems of surveillance, both private and public (police) to a long wall of poster-size photos of the commodification of Northern California water diverted to the Central Valley. There, agricultural corporations own enormous water-starved tracts that should never have been planted in the first place. Cheap land, cheap water, and cheap labor combine to feed America profitably.

Besides the material from the Museum's collection of capitalist detritus, there were several noteworthy collaborations with like-minded groups. Probably the most hilarious contribution in this manner was the Art for a Democratic Society's brochure (near the entrance to the rest-rooms) *The Capitalist Bathroom Experience*.

This brochure was subtitled: "The Struggle for Dignity and Relief in the Capitalist Era," and provided a historic overview of the subject of comfort rewarded after production.

On a more serious note, a section of the Museum delved into a representation of land issues under capitalism. Another collaboration of artists called *American Domain*, explored the enclosure of space that always defines capitalism's quest to homogenize land for control and profit.

The most charming items, recalling surrealist sculpture like Meret Oppenheim's *Fur Lined Cup and Saucer*, were a trio of Police batons carved into flutes.

Besides the various gross representations of economic exploitation in one form or another, the curators of the MOC broadened the conception of this project, beyond simply an archive, to incorporate moments of opposition to capitalism and necessarily to the State that exists to defend the privileges of the one-percent.

The Museum highlighted a most noteworthy opposition—the 1968 encampment on the Mall in Washington, D.C. called *Resurrection City*. Martin Luther King initiated this remarkable demonstration—the creation of a small city on the Mall—that marked his transition from a civil rights leader to a labor leader, which most likely led to his assassination just months before it took shape.

Carrying the oppositional theme forward in time, a large section of the exhibit was devoted to alternatives to capitalism in the form of Oliver Ressler's *Alternative Economics*, *Alternative Societies* exhibit which widely toured in Europe and had its US premier at the Museum.

The Museum of Capitalism, it should be obvious from this very brief excursion, also stood as an intellectual provocation. Museums are assumed to be musty affairs where time is sequestered to better study a topic, but today, for example, the Tech Museum of Innovation in San Jose, California, a kind of Museum of Utopian Capitalism, attempt to be more interactive and popular family fun venues where it seems that the visit is simply prelude to shopping in the gift shop.

While the MOC had a store, though hidden behind the library in a corner of the vast space, all resemblance to a typical museum ended there. The Museum of Capitalism approximated a reverse recuperation: the dominant paradigm turned against itself. Or, what in a previous era would be termed a Situationist *détournement*.

The MOC, however, steered clear of ideology to state a more concrete, if nonetheless utopian project. As they write in their Mission Statement:

“Our educational work is crucial for establishing justice for the victims of capitalism and preventing its resurgence. Notably, the museum will also bring to light the vast number of individuals and communities around the globe who resisted capitalism and helped to develop alternatives to it, serving as an inspiration to future generations.”

This role as an antibody was facilitated by “a variety of public programming designed to enhance understanding of capitalism and related issues, including those of contemporary significance.”

With the Museum’s ongoing surveys, its collaborations, its lecture series, its periodic exhibits of acquisitions, and its recently published book, it defines a project that will continue into the future as a multifaceted disruption of the hegemonic culture of capitalism. What is especially important is that collaborationism may indicate an advance on the individualist/artist role and a repudiation of not only the marketplace but also possessive individualism—the core capitalist “project.”

Don’t be surprised if a Museum of Capitalism, in one form or another, pops-up in your neighborhood.

Bernard Marszalek edited a collection of Paul Lafargue’s essays *The Right to be Lazy* available from AK Press [akpress.org](http://akpress.org). He archives his writing at [ztangi.org](http://ztangi.org).

The Museum of Capitalism: [MuseumofCapitalism.org/](http://MuseumofCapitalism.org/)

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