

Oakland's Museum of Capitalism: "The Ideology, History, and Legacy of Capitalism"

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Featured image: Museum of Capitalism (Source: [CityLab](#))

Museums that house a collection can do so with two consequences: they approve and collaborate with the subject matter (the Tate's pandering to Tracy Emin's menstrual, sex stained bed, as a case in point), or stridently take issue with it, lecturing visitors. (The Holocaust museum.)

The Museum of Capitalism tells its visitors of a mission to educate "this generation and future generations about the **ideology, history, and legacy of capitalism.**" In so doing, there is more than a scant suggestion that we have somehow moved into something after capitalism.[1]

Walking to its location near Jack London Square is ample preparation. It is desolate and coarse: sterile, cold buildings, suddenly punctuated by a wine shop teeming with patrons and tasting options; run down sheds suddenly turned into sharp apartment complexes in spurts of gentrification.

Appropriately enough, the museum is housed within an Oakland waterfront office building, a pop-up exhibition featuring a range of themed items ranging from the Capitalist Bathroom Experience (we all defecate, don't we?) to Mindfulness techniques for the baton wielding, trigger-happy police force. Visual artists predominate. Even the building itself is revealed as an anatomised version of capitalism, ushering the viewer to move through set pieces of power and production.

The museum suggests a counter, a form of resistance against the state. The premise is obvious enough: it is the state that has done more than anything to provide the conditions that enable capitalism to flourish, be it through military industrial complexes, policing, land use, labour and commodities. As **Darwin Bondgraham** notes,

"this museum of capitalism is also a museum of government under capitalism."[2]

But there is nothing to suggest the transcending of capitalism, despite the valiant attempt to consider alternatives through feminist discourse, anarchism, environmental regeneration, and community solidarity. A range of these are supplied in **Oliver Ressler's** multi screen showing "Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies" (2003-2008).

Inevitably, there are a range of displays that poke fun at corporate misbehaviour, though this is done with degrees of savage humour and sombre consideration. Yet this is the United

States, and Oakland is a belt where enterprise and the capitalist urge exist like viral excitements. Outside the museum is the waterfront with glistening boats that are gaudy rather than tasteful, monsters on the sea that float defiantly.

No matter. The museum's website insists on the wisdom of **Raymond Williams**:

"To be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing."

The capitalist project, a point signaled at in the exhibits, was propagandised as not something of despair, but promise. It was erroneously tied to the notion free markets would somehow entail sound democratic practice and more accessible responsible representatives. What did happen, in time, was a surrender of that relevant representation, a literal sell-out to the boardroom, the corporatocracy.

What, then, of this form of human organisation that seems, in the scheme of existence, a short one? The museum does not necessarily promote a world instead of capitalism, or after it. There is, in fact, a significant contemporary dimension to what is on show.

This contemporary dimension features installations that speak of the casualties of capitalism. The sub-prime mortgage catastrophe, the names of banks closed by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, can be viewed as corpses of finance.

The destruction of the singular experience that current processes of capitalism inflict is also evident in Chip Lord's nine-channel video installation "Peak Air Travel: To & From" (2016). The modern global airport city entails the leveling of uniqueness into a dreary, drone-like existence. It brings to mind a remark made by British comedian **Paul Merton**: to go to an airport in China is never to leave one, terrifying as they are in their identical construction.

There is a final irony netted by the museum's display. While being free, the cost has to borne in some way. Tipping, the private customer initiative always encouraged in the United States to pad out poor wages, is encouraged. And the museum itself has been appropriated as part of the regenerative theme of capitalism behind the district's new "image".

As Jack London Improvement District **Executive Director Savlan Hauser** claimed,

"Jack London is an established waterfront destination, but has lacked this kind of cultural anchor... a Museum of Capitalism is the kind of thing our neighbourhood has been missing." [3]

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Notes

[1] <https://qz.com/1015649/a-new-museum-is-preparing-people-for-the-downfall-of-capitalism/>

[2] <https://www.eastbayexpress.com/oakland/seeing-state-power-inside-the-museum-of-capitalism/Content?oid=7843611>

[3] <http://www.salon.com/2017/06/24/opening-day-at-oaklands-museum-of-capitalism/>

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