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What makes a great museum?

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Answering this question is one of the most difficult challenges a museum professional can set him or herself. For this article, I have tried to perform my role as an interpreter and provoke your thoughts on the issue. I was fortunate to have the company of Tim Reeve, Chief Operating Officer at the V&A, to bounce ideas off. Given the sheer diversity of museums, and of opinions on them, there can be no simple answer. Yet, every museum project I undertake begins with asking my clients what difference it makes that their museum exists (after Weil 1999). Answering this positively begins the journey to greatness.

First, outstanding collections, cared for and studied by curators who are experts in their fields, a tremendous building and an illustrious history can help make a museum great but are not enough in themselves. We have all visited dead museums that meet these criteria but hide behind the worthiness of their collections, claiming these justify their existence. To paraphrase the American commentator Stephen Weil, it is not enough to be worthy, a great museum must be worthwhile (Weil 1994). Such a museum will never be just a warehouse or a plaything for like-minded initiates. Collections matter, but what matters more is what you do with them. Each museum, in its own way, has the capacity to become great.

To become great, a museum must have a strong sense of purpose, one signed up to by everyone associated with it – and one pursued in bad times as well as good. Of course, any old sense of purpose will not do. As Tim Reeve pointed out, in discussing one of the most exciting elements of the V&A's plans for the future, "it is important that your sense of purpose remains rooted in your founding mission. The V&A had entrepreneurial activity at its heart from the beginning. Today we do not apologise for seeking to grow and diversify our commercial activity, as if it was only there to fill a funding gap rather than being a legitimate expression of what we do in its own right. Rather the relationships sparked between the curatorial, the creative and the entrepreneurial are part of what makes this museum distinctive."

But a great museum must also be rooted in the present and in the real world. In translating its sense of purpose into the essential three or five year plan, it cannot afford to only look inwards. As Tim made clear, “the great museum must look outwards and be much more receptive to new ideas and innovations coming not just from outside the museum but from outside the sector. We need to get out much more and be prepared to be influenced by views from way beyond our comfort zone.”

It must also be rooted in its audiences. I once wrote: ‘It is a wonderful time to be working in museums – at long last audiences are being given the priority they deserve’ (Black, 2005: ix). The primary purpose of a great museum for me begins and ends with its relationships with its audiences. For any great museum, purpose and relationships with its audiences must reflect the society the museum serves. In recent years, western society has faced a perfect storm of globalisation, economic woes, generational shift, demographic change and the impact of new media. Cultural institutions like museums have not been immune to the impact. In 2009, the cultural commentator Tom Fleming wrote:

We are witnessing a complete renovation of our cultural infrastructure. Those ‘bricks and mortar’ culture houses, citadels of experience, towers of inspiration, that for so long have stood steadfast as symbols of cultural continuity and comfort, while the streets around them have whizzed and clattered to multiple disruptive transformations, are being **turned inside out...** this wholesale renovation is born out of an urgent requirement to change or die, and it is just beginning.

Fleming (2009:1), his emphasis

Yet too many museums appear not to have noticed - they are comfortable in dealing with the past but seem to find the present and future much more difficult. Rather than developing dynamic, creative responses to these positive pressures for change, there is a deep uncertainty. The result is inertia, reflective of a lack of vision and often linked to inexpert leadership, funding cuts, a staff structure and collections geared to another age and responsibility for the expensive maintenance of historic buildings that do not meet modern requirements. They know they must define and adapt to their future roles by establishing what is meant by museum practice for the

21st century – yet most remain vague, at best, about this. They cannot afford to be. Tim commented that “museums must get away from the more rigid and old-fashioned operating models, and be structurally much more dynamic and open to change on a regular basis, as society itself continues to change.”

The starting point is for museums to get to know their existing audiences much better, develop a far more sophisticated understanding of their needs and motivations and then create museum content and programming to exceed these. As Tim said, “It is self-evident that museums are as much about people as collections. All of the big decisions we make should be based on rigorous research of audiences – existing and potential. Every new project should start by standing in the visitor’s shoes and designing visitor journeys and experiences from that perspective.” This is not a chore but, rather, a remarkable opportunity to convert museum audiences from one off visitors into regular users. It is also not a numbers issue: it is through regular engagement with museum content that meaningful learning takes place. If we believe in the power of museums as learning institutions and the ability of cultural learning to change lives, a primary focus should be on making the museum experience something that people want to come back to time and again. Dallas Museum of Art transformed itself after studying its visitors in depth from 2003-2009. It doubled attendance and motivated more than 50% of visitors to take part in its public programmes (Pitman and Hirzy, 2011).

Meanwhile new, particularly mobile, technology is transforming the relationship between museums and their users, making content and participation, onsite and online, more accessible. Yet it is also making museums have to work harder to attract users – if we cannot meet their needs, they will go elsewhere, starting with the internet. To bring them to the museum requires a profoundly different, much more participatory experience – one that involves creating new and more meaningful opportunities for engagement. See, for example, the experiment by the Acropolis Museum in developing personalised story-led routes around the museum for visitors, adding depth to their understanding. Or the growing attempts by museums to encourage deep reflection and resultant visitor contributions that become integral to content, truly extending the representation of multiple perspectives.

This in turn highlights the hairy old issue of the need for museums to share authority for content. We live in a world where at least our younger audiences already take material online and actively share, sort, classify, collaboratively re-think, re-classify, re-publish and re-use it as they see fit. We need to apply their expectations to our museums and also recognise the expertise that many of our visitors can bring. For an example that also encompasses the entrepreneurial, have a look at the Rijksstudio at the Rijksmuseum, where 150,000 artworks are available to download and use – including, making your own product and selling it through the Studio's pop-up shop (<https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/rijksstudio>).

However, not surprisingly, museums have always been highly protective of their reputations while individual curators, like most professionals, are not readily willing to abandon their cognitive authority. Both these factors can lead to a failure to free up the museum visit to give users more control of their own outcomes, opportunities to contribute directly to content and the potential to influence the nature and ethos of the organisation itself. Yet, this is largely a paper problem, not a real one. A great museum will be confident in itself. Tim said “Museums should not worry about conversation or challenge. If you have an outstanding collection and have properly conserved and fully researched it, you should be confident in reaching out to – and hearing back from – all your potential audiences. First class curatorship is about an ability to take that research and understanding and apply it through multiple platforms to as diverse an audience as possible.”

And audiences will continue to want to hear the authoritative voice of the museum. What they increasingly will not do is accept museums as authoritarian – they will expect to have the opportunity to reflect on and respond to that voice. None of this denies the role of the great museum in developing and transmitting knowledge. In fact, it helps museum visitors acquire a deeper understanding of the content, resulting from direct participation. Overall, this represents opportunities undreamt of by our predecessors to share collections, enthusiasms and expertise with the world, and to work with museum publics for the benefit of all.

But a great museum cannot restrict itself to its traditional white, professional, highly educated audiences. Museums are for everyone. This was a founding principle for most public museums established in the 19th century. It has regained prominence over particularly the last thirty years and is prominent in the UK Museums Association's Code of Ethics. The development and retention of new audiences should be at the core of what great museums do, on both ethical and business grounds. Ethically, museums hold the cultural memory of humankind and access should not be the exclusive right of an educated elite, nor should its content exclude the contributions made by large sectors of the population. In business terms, demographic change means the audience base of many museums, particularly in inner cities, is changing. In the medium to long term, museums must reach out successfully to these new audiences or die. However, it is not a case of one or the other – museums need to both grow the active support of traditional audiences and develop new users.

The potential is enormous. A great museum, committed to partnership with its communities, will break the stranglehold of its physical site and restricted opening hours and reach outwards, beyond its walls, housed collections, 'safe' history and traditional audiences. As such, museums can become 'third places', non-threatening environments in which they can work with their communities to develop partnerships that promote dialogue, build community capacity and support civil engagement. Have a look at the website of the Centre for Cultural Understanding and Change at Chicago Field Museum (www.fieldmuseum.org/ccuc) or, even better, visit the wonderful Hackney Museum.

I want to finish on a personal note – what makes a great museum *experience* for me? Part of the public role of the museum has always been to support the visitor or learner as observer. Recognising that observation is not a passive role is central to this. I have a mental image of the user's voice sitting at the heart of the museum – the buzz of conversation and discussion amongst museum audiences as they encounter and respond to the objects and other content within the museum, as they interact with each other and as they contribute to content. Such a museum will recognise the visit as an enthusiastic conversation between the collections, the users

and the museum rather than simply seeing users as empty vessels to be filled with didactic content.

Borrowing from and adding to Charles Landry's paper (2003) on what makes museums special, I see my perfect museum experience as four dimensional. It has breadth because it broadens my horizons. It has depth in that it brings out the significant. It has height in that it generates aspiration through inspiration. And it has longevity in that the experience stays with me, and grows in me.

The strapline for the Abba Museum, in Stockholm, is that you walk in but dance out. That is what happens inside me on every perfect museum visit.

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