Remember the 70%: sustaining 'core' museum audiences

Abstract

This paper uses the UK as a case study to explore the urgent need for museums to develop strategies for the retention of 'core' museum audiences – the well-educated professionals and their families and friends who currently represent around 70% of museum attendance. It is a 'provocation' in four parts: the failure of museums to attract enough of this audience; an out-of-date display model and mind-set; the need for museums to rebrand themselves as social and leisure destinations; and a call for museums to acknowledge through their actions that their relationship with their audiences has changed.

The failure of museums to react adequately to incremental change in western society since the end of the Second World War sits at the heart of the paper. Their response in the past has invariably been piecemeal, but what is required now is root and branch change. The alternative is that many museums will not survive.

Key words

'Core' audiences; incremental change; obsolete displays and mind-sets; leisure destinations; personalisation; social learning

Introduction

This paper is intended as a provocation. It uses the UK as a case study to explore the urgent need for Western museums to develop strategies for the retention of 'core' museum audiences – the well-educated professionals and their families and friends who currently represent around 70% of museum attendees. This audience is for museums to lose and such a loss would be catastrophic for their future.

When considering core audiences, there are two interrelated problems. The first is a loss of relevance to contemporary audiences. Since the 1990s, western society has faced the cumulative impact of globalisation, economic crisis, generational shift, demographic change and the impact of new media and, as a result, the speed of change has grown dramatically. This is widely recognised within the museum field. The second issue, is the failure of museums to attract a high enough percentage of the well-educated, professional classes in the first place, a problem that has received scant attention from the museum profession.

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Provocation 1: The failure of museums to attract more of the well-educated, professional classes is a long-standing problem.

There is little visitor research to help define the demographic make-up of museum visitors before the 1970s. However, we know from the analysis of countless surveys carried out over the last fifty years, beginning perhaps with Bourdieu & Darbel's *The Love of Art* (1969), that – although clearly not the only factors influencing museum visitation - those from higher socio-economic groups and with higher levels of education have consistently made up the majority of museum attendees (for a UK summary of early surveys, see Davies, S., 1994; for the USA see Hood 1983, 1993). They are also significantly more likely to attend regularly (Bunting et al, 2007). Despite the shortage of earlier research, it seems reasonable to extrapolate these conclusions backwards in time.

Acknowledging this means recognising significant growth in <u>potential</u> museum audiences since the Second World War. Societal and economic upheavals following the war have resulted in – amongst other things – a rapidly growing professional class which has benefitted from: improving educational opportunities; both increased wealth and the leisure time (including paid holiday entitlement) to spend it; the gradual merging of high and popular culture; and the democratisation of travel through car ownership and, later, cheap flights. All of this has been accompanied by the spread of television and more recently the internet, bringing new subject areas and both breadth and depth of content to almost every Western household in an instant. I cannot find a museum publication that explores the combined impact (or lack of impact) of all these factors on museum visitation.

As an example, let me reference educational achievement. In 1950, 17,300 people in England and Wales were awarded undergraduate degrees and 14% of 16-year-olds were in full-time education (Finkelstein, 2015). In 2014, 378,600 people received undergraduate degrees (HESA, 2015) and 71.5% of 16-18 year-olds were in full-time education (DfE, 2015). Given that the higher your educational achievement, the more likely you are both to visit museums and to make this a regular occurrence (Black, 2012, 22-23), a twenty-two fold increase in people with degrees should have had a significant positive impact on museum attendance, even allowing for factors that would limit museum usage such as more choice of things to do and pressure on time.

One industry that reacted swiftly to societal change is tourism. As a result not least of growing wealth and the rise of paid holiday entitlement, international tourism has increased exponentially since 1950, when there were an estimated 25 million international tourist arrivals worldwide. Annual growth has averaged over 6%, exceeding one billion international arrivals for the first time in 2012, with European tourism accounting for more than half of this (United Nations World Tourism Barometer, u/d). If museum visitor numbers had increased at the same rate as international tourism, audience figures today would be 700% of those in 1978, and still over 400% if we look just at Europe. And this is before we consider the growth of car ownership and the resulting huge rise in leisure day trips, the backbone of the UK visitor market. In 2013, the average person in the UK made 923 car trips (DfT, 2014). Outside London, a substantial majority of UK museum visitors come by car. Clearly I am not saying museums should have matched tourism figures, but the latter give a sense of scale, of 'what if' museum attendance had matched the rise in potential audience.

Audience growth to post war museums started off as one might hope. There was a general rise in UK museum attendance, commented on in the press by the early 1960s, including an article in the Observer newspaper in 1961 entitled 'Boom in the Museums' (Petschek, 1961). In the USA, the first ever statistical survey by the American Association of Museums revealed a doubling in museum visits from 1952-62 (AAM, 1965, 23, quoted in Goldsmith, u/d). The Association went on to report '... growing public attendance: 200 million visitors in 1960, 300 million in 1965, and 700 million in 1970' (Kai-Kee, 2011, 34). Yet, at a time when museums were claiming to be more visitor friendly, and while societal change was producing a growing audience of people who <u>should</u> have wanted to visit museums, these rises seem, at best, to have stalled. Today, what is now called the American Alliance of Museums reports approximately 850 million visitors per year (AAM u/d), a very limited increase in the more than forty years since the 1970 figure, particularly as the population of the USA has increased by more than 50% in that time. In recent years, there has actually been a substantial decline in art museum attendance in the USA from 26% of the population in 2002 to 21% in 2012 (NEA, 2013). Even the free admission museums of the mighty Smithsonian Institution have been doing no better than treading water since mid-1980s: 30m visitors in 1984; 28m in 2015 (Smithsonian Newsdesk 2016). In the European Union there has been a general decline in participation in most cultural activities, including only 37% of European citizens visiting museums or galleries, down from 41% between 2007 and 2013 (European Commission, 2013).

In the UK, between 1980 and 1996 alone, around 730 new public and independent museums opened (Middleton 1998, 20). Yet despite this rapid expansion, a greater focus on audiences, rising numbers of potential users and a growing population, visitor numbers did no more than tread water, as illustrated in figure 1. Instead, the number of museums in England and Wales increased much faster than demand, and as a result *average* attendance at individual destinations fell considerably, from 72,000 in 1978 to 46,000 in 1996 (Middleton 1998, 21). Middleton also showed that between 1988 and 1997 there was a decline in the proportion of the English population visiting museums at least once a year, from 29% to 26% (Middleton 1998, 17).

Figure 1: Attendance at UK museums 1989-2014
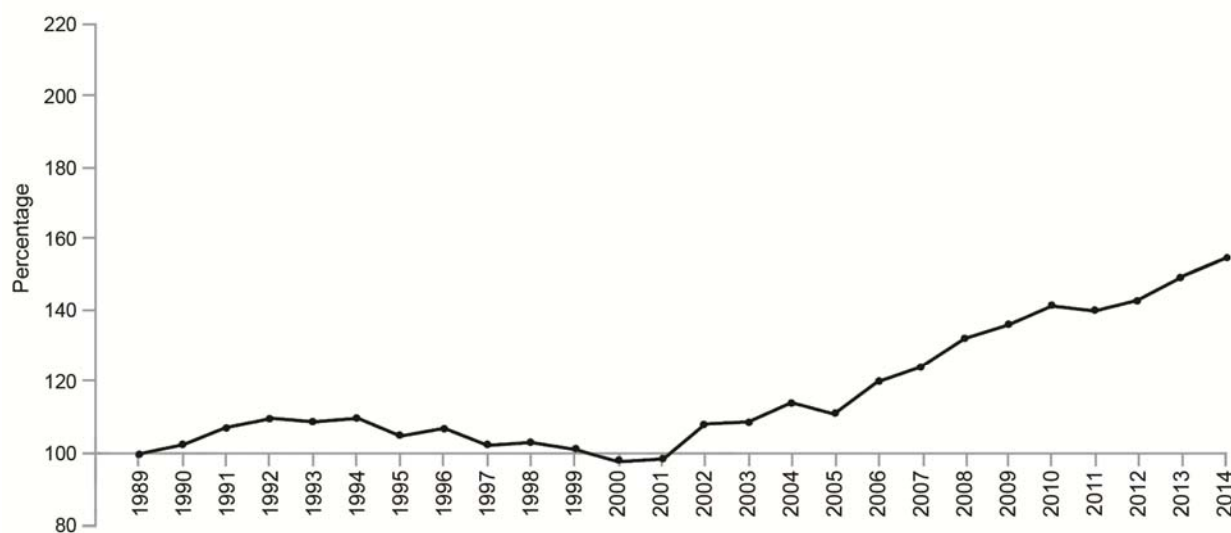
after Visit England 2015, 14, reproduced with kind permission of Visit England

Figure 1 demonstrates an indexed visits trend, from a base year of 1989, set at 100. It was created originally for comparison across attraction categories. However, it demonstrates dramatically the failure of museums to expand attendance through the 1990s. A further graph by Middleton (1990, 18), not reproduced here, shows this was also the case back to 1978. Figure 1 also reveals that visits to museums and art galleries overall are now over 50% higher than they were on the introduction of free entry to UK national museums in 2001. This increase is largely driven by visits to these museums. UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) data shows attendance at London nationals up 151% since 2001 and nationals outside London by 148%. (Visit England 2015, 15). In practice, the vast majority of the

increase in visits to London nationals has been by international tourists, reflecting the rise of London to become the world's top tourist destination. Visits to national museums in London by overseas tourists have increased by almost 40% since 2008/9, while visits from within the UK have increased by just 3% during this same period (Arts Professional, 2015). Over 50% of visits to London nationals are now made by overseas tourists, reflected in table 1 below:

Table 1: National Museums in London: visitor data 2013-14

Museum	Total visitors 2014	% from overseas
British Museum	6,695,213	58%
National Gallery	6,416,724	61%
Tate Modern	5,785,427	50% for group
Natural History Museum	5,388,295	48%
Science Museum	3,356,072	27% for group
V&A South Kensington	3,180,450	47%
National Portrait Gallery	2,062,502	40%
National Maritime Museum	1,516,258	46% for National Museums Greenwich
Tate Britain	1,357,878	Part of Tate group
Imperial War Museum London	914,774	37%

after ALVA, 2015 and DCMS, 2015a

The percentages for overseas visitors at Tate, the Science Museum and Imperial War Museum shown in box 1 are underestimates as they represent groups of museums which include sites located outside London – for example, only 2% of visitors to Tate St Ives in Cornwall are from overseas (British Council, 2015, 9). We also know that substantial rises in visits by international tourists to the National Gallery and Tate Modern in London masked a steep decline in visits to these institutions by UK nationals (Gompertz, 2015). This is not a criticism of international tourism but, rather, a concern that tourist figures hide a worrying decline in domestic usage.

Today, museums continue to under-achieve in terms of their ability to attract their core audiences. Many in this demographic do not visit at all, while most who do visit museums come once a year or less. This is clear from the *Taking Part* household survey in England which looks at participation in the cultural and sports sectors. The survey, commissioned by the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in partnership with Arts Council England, Historic England, and Sport England first took place in 2005/6 (DCMS, 2013). The ensuing ten years initially coincided with additional funding for museums, both revenue from central government and capital from the Heritage Lottery Fund, before witnessing severe revenue cuts since 2010, following the financial crisis of 2007/8. The period has seen: a rise in the percentage of the English population who visit a museum at least once a year, from 42% to 50%; a rise from 13% to 17% in those visiting 3 – 4 times a year; and a relatively static 3% - 4% who visit museums at least monthly (DCMS, 2015b, 21).

I have always been concerned by the presentation of once-a-year visitors as the lead figure in such surveys. It is too much like going to church at Christmas. Such rare attendance can have limited impact on visitors. We do not even know how many are using their local museums and for how many a museum visit is no more than a very occasional activity on holiday or when children are off school. The publication of the first *Taking Part* longitudinal surveys, based on annual interviews with the same people has also revealed that there is a turnover in those claiming once a year attendance, with 13% saying they had visited a museum in their first interview, but not at the second, and vice versa. So, what we have with a substantial majority of museum visitors is only very occasional contact. This is probably a reflection of visiting habits across western society. Only 3% of Australians visit museums monthly and 5% visit art galleries (Boomerang, 1998, 41-42). Statistics are collected differently in the European Union, so we know that only 6 – 7% visit over five times per year (European Commission, 2013, 17).

The first year of the *Taking Part* survey in England asked why people did not visit. The answers, from those who knew the museum existed, are shown in table 2:

Table 2 Reasons given for not visiting a museum

1. Not really interested	35.5%
2. It's difficult to find the time	29.2%

3. Lack of transport/I can't easily get to it	10.4%
4. Never occurred to me	9.8%
5. Health isn't good enough	9.5%
6. No need to go	8.1%
7. I wouldn't enjoy it	4.5%
8. It costs too much	4.4%
9. Not enough information on what is available	3.3%
10. Have been in past/no need to go again	2.0%
11. Not child friendly/children too young	1.2%
12. I have no one to go with	1.1%
13. Other reasons	5.0%

after Aust & Vine, 2007

Bunting et al (2007) suggest that the picture looks quite different when higher and lower socio-economic groups are examined separately. Lack of interest is the real barrier for lower socio-economic groups, but for higher socio-economic groups the issue is lack of time. This is reinforced by more recent survey work in both the USA (NEA, 2015) and UK. The *Taking Part Longitudinal Survey* suggests that having less free time is the most important reason for people coming less often (38% amongst all reasons given; 27% as main reason). Conversely, the main reason given for visiting more often was having more free time (21% amongst all reasons given; 17% as main reason).(DCMS, 2015, 23-24). Frustratingly the survey does not relate the issue to demographic groups.

Perhaps time-poor daily lives help to explain the sustained rise of heritage tourism. If people do not have time to visit museums and other cultural venues in their normal lives, could they be using their holiday time to make up for that gap? Certainly there is scope for museums and the tourism industry to work ever more closely together. There is a long-standing, symbiotic relationship between the two fields but, for much of the time, it has been an uneasy and fragmented one. However, increasing museum focus on audiences has led to a coming together with tourism bodies around a shared need to better understand the motivations and expectations of their users and respond innovatively to these.

Provocation 2: The permanent exhibition in its current form is a failed model and symptomatic of a deeper malaise

> ... a concern I reluctantly have been entertaining… that museum exhibitions might be an obsolete medium, out on the dying limb of an evolutionary tree, and unless they **significantly adapt** to their rapidly changing environments in the coming years, they could be headed toward extinction.
>
> Mclean, 2007, 117

While an estimated 95% of museums worldwide have been founded since the end of the Second World War (Lowenthal, 1998, 16), I would argue that the core public offer of the Western museum is still based on the 19th century public museum and is unsuitable for 21st century audiences. One can only imagine what it was like to have been a curator in the mid-nineteenth century, when newly developing collections in our museums were integral to the rise of the great disciplines of archaeology and palaeontology, anthropology, natural history and biology, geology, history and art history - as a part of the evolutionary sequencing of the earth, of life, of humankind, of civilisation (Bennett, 1995, 95). Suddenly, for example, the earth itself was no longer around 6000 years old, as biblical scholars had it. Instead, thanks to geological archaeologists, limitless vistas of the past appeared (Bennett, 2004: 2). With the rejection of religious authority, humankind was free to define its own past, and prehistory became something that concerned everyone (Nielsen, 2014, 95). And museum exhibition made prehistory visible to the public at large. Here, museums were incubators of new understanding that truly changed people's perceptions of the world.

Curators presented this new world primarily through 'learning at a glance' – in permanent displays that placed specimens, artefacts or paintings in the 'correct' order, defined either through classification or through creating chronologies. Both approaches reflected an ambition to develop an objective, systematic representation of the world as knowable by Western audiences. Classification was the common approach adopted in early natural history and anthropological displays with exemplar objects grouped, for example by geographical region, and then ranked taxonomically within the groups. The objects are displayed by their position in the classification, not for their individual stories. For Holmes, discussing anthropological display in 1902, the visitor should '...gather quickly a clear impression of the people and culture of the area represented' (Holmes, 1902, 489). In contrast, chronological displays, whether art or history focussed, sought to provide linear narratives. The art gallery

laid out by period, school or region provided an at a glance analysis of art history. History galleries presented a coherent linear account of the past, often heavily dependent on text, with objects frequently in a supporting role – either illustrating a point or, through room settings and other 'environments', seeking to give a sense of living in the past. Such art and history displays are still common.

Learning at a glance may have worked for 19th century audiences, although we cannot know with certainty as visitor research was rare. In practice, the approach has left an unfortunate legacy of permanent displays as three-dimensional illustrated lectures, transmitting knowledge from the curator/lecturer to be absorbed by visitors as observers. The problem is that, despite the wide range of types of museum to be found today, most still see the didactic permanent display, with its one-way transmission of knowledge in ordered, bite-sized pieces from museum to visitor, as the core of their public provision.

The continuing prioritisation of such permanent displays is underpinned by a founding assumption of public museums, and a central justification for funding, namely that audiences come primarily to learn and that permanent displays are the most effective way to support this. In practice, this is only one of a range of reasons for the continuing museum reliance on permanent displays, most of them managerial, summarised in box 1.

Box 1: Why museums continue to produce permanent exhibitions

- Assumption visitors come primarily to learn, best achieved through permanent displays
- Efficient way to provide public access to core collections, given limited resources and in comparison to a challenging, exhausting, resource heavy and costly non-stop programme of temporary exhibitions
- Give curators time to do other work
- Habit – museums have always done them and people expect them
- Support collections conservation – security, lighting, environment all sustained, and handling minimised
- Appear to involve little risk:
 - seemed to work in the past
  - management knows what to expect

- curators and designers know how to 'do' them

- regular visitors familiar with them and unthreatened by them

- museum controls content – objects; associated stories; visitor experience

- Familiar to funders, who understand what you are asking them to grant aid and see a lifespan for the end product
- Cater for irregular levels of audience usage
- Allow long-term programming and marketing
- Schools develop learning materials for children to use year after year, so want the same displays to remain in place
- Support the museum's existing staff structure and current priorities

However, there are compelling reasons why the current form of permanent exhibition is obsolete. They are very expensive to install and then to replace. Even when poor, they linger on well past their 'sell-by' date. And they are becoming increasingly similar to each other, under the influence of commercial design companies. Creating a permanent exhibition also takes an inordinate amount of time and exhausts both funding and staff, who frequently juggle exhibition development alongside everyday work. They then allow curators to think the work is over when the exhibition opens – the team involved rush either back to their documentation or on to the next new thing. Instead, a whole new phase of work should start once the public is admitted. Over the lifespan of the exhibition, the displays become increasingly out of date yet it is very difficult to get money to refresh. And there is a direct relationship between rarely changing content and a take it or leave it attitude to users. Permanent displays breed complacency towards the public amongst museum personnel – see, for example, Mclean's description of neglect during her visits to three museums in Toronto (Mclean, 2007).

And their permanence ignores the attraction life cycle, a phenomenon well-recognised by the tourism industry but ignored in the museum world. While my comments on figure 1 made clear that the bulk of the increase in UK museum attendance since 2001 was due to international tourists visiting national museums in London, there was also increased visitation to the larger regional museums following major redevelopment. However, numbers tail off as content then remains unchanged, with declining attendance normally setting in within three to five years. Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow took only six years from its re-opening in 2006,

after a £28million redevelopment, for numbers to fall back to pre-development levels (Sharp, 2012). The graph of visitor numbers at the Tales of Robin Hood, a commercial development in Nottingham, shown as figure 2, illustrates the issue perfectly:

Figure 2: Attraction life cycle: The Tales of Robin Hood, Nottingham
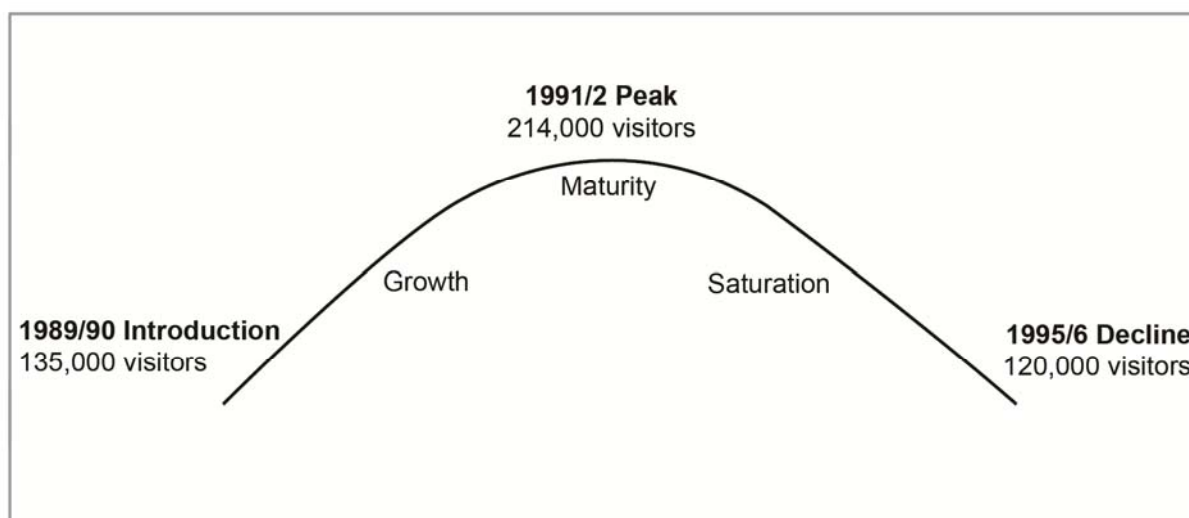
after Black 2005, 16

The issue here was not due to a poor exhibition – the winner of many awards – but to the lack of a renewable audience and of the funding required to redevelop the product. Outside tourist destinations, people may come a few times and perhaps return again when friends or relatives come to stay, but eventually they will feel they have 'done' the site. Museums, filled with permanent galleries, will be seen as never-changing. A failure to recognise this issue has left the UK littered with expensive, static exhibitions with perhaps decades of life ahead of them. Minor changes do not count – as staff discovered at Kelvingrove, audiences do not notice unless the change is substantial.

However, these practical issues are as nothing when compared to the negative images of museums that permanent exhibitions project to the public. Because of the way they are almost inevitably developed, based on the assumption that museum visitors come primarily to learn, they encourage the wrong display approach – didactic, unchanging, requiring a passive response and presenting the museum's single point of view as definitive. The core museum offer plays down the social nature of the museum visit, presents learning as external to the visitor and ignores the visitor's prior knowledge and experiences. It also fails to recognise

today's reality that, if someone's primary aim is to find out stuff, he or she will look it up on Google or Wikipedia.

Thus, at a time when the speed of change in western society is almost beyond our comprehension and when, as a result, museums need to be at their most audience-centred - participative, fast-moving, flexible, dynamic and experimental – permanent exhibitions both physically prevent change and also present potential audiences with an image of museums as dreary, didactic, passive and never changing. This in turn perpetuates the one-off visit, with audiences feeling they have 'done' the museum. No wonder museums have difficulty sustaining core audiences – they are struggling to survive with a 19th century model in a 21st century world.

However, if the display model was the main problem, it would be relatively easy to solve. There is a wide range of alternatives available, including the social museum of Janes (e.g. 2009), Sandell (e.g. 2012) and Silverman (e.g. 2010); the participatory museum with strong community activist underpinning of Simon (2010); the constructivist museum of Hein (e.g. 1998); the social learning model of Falk & Dierking (e.g. 2000), Kelly (e.g. 2007) and Black (e.g. 2012); the interactives of science centres; the immersive museum from living history to virtual reality; and others including, of course, community museums. All of these have been explored as new models for a modern, active, participating audience.

Yet, the didactic transmission-absorption model remains the norm.

Even the interactive exhibit is still the single voice of the museum. The user is involved, but the museum remains in control of the outcome. Here is a critique from the Exploratorium in San Francisco, spiritual home of the interactive science exhibit:

> Their investigatory activity was driven almost exclusively *by the museum*: they followed the label's directions about what to do, what to notice, and how to understand the experience… they rarely go beyond the museum's instructions to ask and pursue their own questions.
>
> Gutwill & Allen (2010:9)

In practice, this didacticism is symptomatic of a much deeper malaise. The displays are developed by museum personnel and approved by museum management. The underlying problem is the mind-set of those creating them. Without a fundamental change of mind-set, it will stay like this. A report on innovation in Australian museums sums up the issue:

> While the study identified many examples of innovative practice... initiatives tend to be isolated, episodic and difficult to sustain in the long term...Only a few... organisations have made fundamental changes to their planning, structures and operations to place innovation... at the core rather than as add-on activities.

> Mansfield et al (2014: xi)

Because of the mind-sets of too many museum personnel, at all levels, unnecessary barriers remain between galleries, museums, archives and libraries, and between disciplines. Staff structures and other organisational forms reflect past needs, not the present or future. Display innovation is seen as meaning design add-ons rather than sustained transformation.

Collections, and the permanent galleries that house them, represent a museum's chief reason for existing and for people visiting. Both the collections and the audiences deserve better than they are currently getting. I believe there are many ways to revitalise the permanent display for the 21st century, both digital and non-digital. What we urgently need, however, is for more museums to be involved in a sustained period of experimentation: to take risks, to learn from their mistakes and share the learning, to bring audiences on board in pilot schemes. Most advances come through trial and error. James Dyson famously worked through 5126 failed prototypes in the process of creating the dual cyclone vacuum cleaner. Perhaps we do not need that many.

Provocation 3: Museums must re-brand themselves as high quality social and leisure destinations

When not faced with set questions, museum audiences state clearly that their primary reasons for visiting a museum are social and recreational. As early as 1986 Roger Miles, writing about visitors to the Natural History Museum in London, contrasted the museum's attitude to its visitors with that of the visitors themselves:

> *The 'Scholarly' Perception.* This is based on funding the Museum as a place of learning rather than of leisure. The Museum is concerned with education, which is seen as a strait-laced matter involving principally the memorising of facts that are obtained by examining the objects on show and by reading their captions.
> *The 'Visitor' Perception.* In the eyes of the lay public a visit to the British Museum (Natural History) is a social event... Three quarters of the visitors come with family or with friends... They perceive the museum as a place of entertainment, and no firm distinction is to be drawn between recreation and education.

Miles, 1986, 75

As recently as 2015 a National Endowment for the Arts report, *When Going gets Tough*, stated that 73% of Americans put socializing with friends or family as their top reason for attending <u>any</u> arts event or exhibition (NEA, 2015). And the continuing failure of museums to recognise the social nature of the majority of museum visits also renders most summative display evaluations of very little value as they '... prioritise the individual and tend to neglect the importance of social interaction in how visitors behave in and experience museums and galleries.' (Davies & Heath, 2013, 5)

The concept of the museum as a social and leisure destination is a fundamentally difficult one for museum professionals to accept. Education and learning are rooted in the work ethic, thus a good thing. Social and leisure activities are rooted in the pursuit of pleasure, thus a bad thing. But museums must recognise the extent to which traditional audiences have changed. Quality is the key. Destinations should now match lifestyle expectations. Already by the mid-1980s, tourism bodies were aware that the baby boomer generation were turning themselves into 'new consumers'. They spoke of growing professional class affluence leading to a highly informed, well-educated, media-savvy, more culturally diverse, more individualistic and extensively travelled audience – resulting in increasingly demanding expectations of quality, choice and variety, and of new but personalised experiences (e.g. Poon,1993; Sharpley, 1996). This is what traditional museum visitors have become.

Many of our larger institutions have recognised the rise of this new consumer and the centrality of the leisure motive, evidenced by the ancillary spaces and activities they now see as essential: the quality restaurant and shop; the theatre with lectures, film, and live performance; the evening openings and activities; and the external plaza for promenading and events. The Pompidou Centre, established in 1977, open late into the evening, 'filled with life, food and drink' and with an animated external plaza, is probably the precursor of this model, at least in Europe (Davis, 1990, 41). The blockbuster exhibition sits alongside these leisure spaces as an essential element in the offer, with the income raised increasingly important as public subsidy falls.

In these circumstances, it is no surprise that Tate Modern was an immediate success when it opened in London in 2000, that the Great Court at the British Museum has become a 'place to

meet' – and that Chris Dercon, Director of Tate Modern, when he announced a £215m extension in 2011, said: "The museum is not just about viewing and judging objects... we want to provide a new form of social space for interactions" (Daily Telegraph, 2011). In September 2015 he acknowledged that only 24% of its new Switch House building would be developed as galleries, with most of the remainder devoted to spaces for the public to mingle, rest and discuss what they had seen. Dercon said 'People are still looking for inspiration but most of them said "We come to Tate Modern because this is a space for encounters." We are creating much more space for conversation' (Malvern, 2015). We can see the impact of this approach also in Tate-influenced regional contemporary art galleries in the UK, like Hepworth Wakefield, Nottingham Contemporary and Turner Art Centre in Margate.

The approach being developed at Tate Modern is based on substantive research amongst existing visitors, many of whom have a real interest in modern art. You can see development based on such research elsewhere, particularly in the USA, for example at Denver Art Gallery, Oakland Museum of California and Dallas Museum of Art. However, much of this seems targeted at those who visit relatively regularly, and on the individual rather than the family or social group. What about all those who do not have this level of commitment? What do less involved professional people do in their leisure time? A further study in England under the *Taking Part* banner asked people to look at a list of activities and tick the ones they took part in during their free time. People could select as many as they liked, with the key entries illustrated in table 3 below:

Table 3: Free time activities for adults, April 2013 – March 2014

Watching TV	90.4
Spending time with family/friends	89.1
Listening to music	78.9
Shopping	77.0
Eating out at restaurants	74.4
Internet/emailing	69.9
Reading	69.0
Days out or visits to places	68.7
Sport/exercise	57.4
Going to the cinema	52.9

Going to pubs/bars/clubs	50.4
Gardening	49.5
Theatre/ Music Concerts	44.2
DIY	41.3
Visiting historic sites	40.2
Visiting museums/galleries	38.2
Playing computer games	28.8
Arts and crafts	23.2
Playing a musical instrument	10.4

after DCMS, 2015c, 3

Of those respondents who visited museums or galleries, '...a quarter of adults felt that the activity was brilliant, giving it a top score of 10 out of 10', while 95.9% said they would definitely or probably visit again, and 74.4% had recommended it to others (DCMS, 2015c, 10). Yet such positive responses seem contradicted by the actual attendance percentages quoted earlier. One aspect of the issue concerns 'the wrong positive perceptions'. A survey of the general population of Sydney carried out in 1998 contrasted comments about museums as 'absorbing', 'intellectual', 'thought-provoking', 'educational' and 'places where one can touch the past and discover new things' with attributes the respondents defined for their ideal leisure experience – one which was 'fun, entertaining, exciting, relaxing, a place where one could take friends, a place where one could get lost in...' This is reflected in the external activities respondents to the Boomerang survey participated in most frequently, listed in table 4:

Table 4: Activities engaged in by Sydney residents at least monthly

going to restaurants and cafes	66%
exercising and playing sport	64%
shopping for pleasure	59%
visiting pubs and clubs	52%
visiting parks and gardens	46%
going to the theatre/movies	41%
going to the beach	35%
attending sporting events	34%

after Boomerang, 1998, 41-42

Visiting art galleries and museums was a frequent event (by which the survey meant monthly) for only 5% and 3% of respondents respectively (Boomerang, 1998: 42). The Boomerang list directly reflects the activities one would engage in if seeking to spend time with families of friends, as 89.1% of people said they did in the *Taking Part* survey (box 2 above). The challenge for museums is to persuade people that a visit to their site will provide a first class social outing. To do so, museums should re-assess their product and marketing, from a leisure perspective. This will include taking a fundamentally different approach to display, based around social learning, in my view one that will also be much more effective in engaging and inspiring visitors.

Provocation 4: Museums must acknowledge through their practice as well as verbally that their relationship with their audiences has changed permanently

It is a commonplace now for museum personnel to speak of the changing nature of their audiences. Gone is the visitor as passive observer. In his or her place are active participants. The role of the museum is therefore to support them to become an involved part of what we do, including collaborating with them in experimenting with new ways of engagement. But it is another matter in practice when this means giving up authority, making a fundamental shift to open access, or genuinely becoming '...more porous to outside contributors...' (Mansfield et al, 2014: vi). How can museums most effectively translate their fine words into action?

A starting point is to trust audiences more to develop their own experiences. Visitors may be on a social outing, but they have chosen to do this at a museum because they want to discover new things as well, to broaden their horizons and/or to engage their children. They may be in recreational mode but, for them, the qualities of a leisure experience include, among others: '... such phenomena as enjoyment, freedom, relaxation, personal growth and social interaction - qualities which can readily be derived, it should be noted, in a museum environment' (Shaw, 1985 quoted in Stephen, 2001, 401)

We can also learn much more about how our audiences actually behave. Despite the efforts of Bitgood (e.g. 2013), Falk & Dierking (e.g. 2012) Serrell (1998), and others, we have remarkably little systematic modern research on the behavior of visitors in the actual exhibitions themselves. Invariably, most summative evaluations '… pay limited attention to

the actual conduct of visitors ... when they are looking at and discussing exhibits. The complexities, details and contingencies of visitors' actions and activities, their talk and visible conduct that arises during the course of a visit remain largely neglected' (Davies & Heath, 2013, 18). Yet it is possible to make some observations.

A museum visit takes place in a three-dimensional environment. It is a whole body experience: visitors move through gallery spaces at their own pace, with and amongst other people, engaging physically, socially, intellectually and perhaps emotionally as they see fit. The museum experience is place specific, active and self-directed, dependent on motivation, but taking place within a social-recreational context. As such, visitors rarely want to become experts in the subject you are presenting – but they do want to enjoy exploring and learning about the site or subject alongside their families and friends. It is up to them how much and what type of learning occurs, and how meaningful it is. Personalisation sits at the heart of this. Visitors seek to use museums as they want, not as the museum dictates - and what they want are experiences they can tailor to their individual and/or group requirements.

There is nothing new to visitors personalising their museum experiences. Museum visitors long ago developed their own positive strategies for coping with linear didactic displays – whether pinballing between elements that personally interested them (resulting in evaluators consistently recording visitors exploring no more than 20 – 40 per cent of content), or the family approach of 'forage, broadcast and comment' documented by McManus (1994: 91). They want to be able to do things, discover for themselves and chat with each other about it.

This can easily lead to curatorial judgements of visitors as non-diligent, unfocused, unsystematic, random and haphazard meanderers (Rounds, 2004). There is an alternative explanation – and one that seems much more likely, given that we recognise core visitors as well-educated professionals – which is that they are choosing for themselves how they use their museum visit. These informal, non-captive, social audiences have always been wonderfully anarchic. They come when they want, set their own agendas, do what they want and leave when they want. Their museum experience is voluntary, exploratory, spontaneous.

The challenge for museums is to recognize that these visitors want to enjoy themselves in a recreational setting while engaging actively with what is on offer. This means giving much more attention to the creation of a high quality social and recreational environment that

matches the lifestyles of the new consumers, encourages exploration **and** brings people back. To achieve this, the starting point for museums is to understand and promote learning as a <u>social</u> activity – relaxation, conversation, social interaction, participation, reflection, collaboration, contribution – through which visitors can develop their own understanding. The social driver thus becomes a basis for the engagement, learning and inspirational encounters we, and our visitors, want to achieve. This is a 'bottom-up' approach, driven by the users. It means an expectation of a profoundly different, much more participatory, museum experience – one that involves creating new and meaningful opportunities for engagement that have the potential to lead to long-term relationships between museums and their users (on-site and online).

And long-term relationships are what museums require if they are to be both sustainable and able to fulfil their missions as educators. We know that regularity of use changes visitor behaviour. Even for those who make a habit of visiting different museums, the first-time trip to a new site will be driven by orientation, behaviour setting and novelty. For the once-a-year visitor, the learning that takes place will normally be cursory. If the museum can persuade its users to visit more often, learning will become much more central to the activity and more meaningful to them, particularly when they are willing to move from the familiar to the unfamiliar, connecting new experiences to their previous understandings and then talking with each other, and others, about these.

How is this to be achieved? In the forty years I have worked in and with museums, they have been in a constant state of piecemeal change, but we are now long past the stage where this is enough. We are also past the point where museums could impose their content and display approaches on their visitors – particularly so far as younger generations are concerned. There is no simple answer. The museum experience is a holistic one, so change must encompass every aspect of the museum offer. This also requires a shared vision of the visitor experience amongst all those working in a museum – putting the visitor first. Beyond that, every museum and its location is different.

And there are real problems in meeting growing audience expectations for increasingly personalised experiences and new forms of interaction through digital provision. Like many museum writers and practitioners, I can suggest approaches that will enhance visitor

engagement and enjoyment. What I cannot do, however, is provide the resources needed to achieve them:

> ... increasingly audiences expect artistic creators and distributors to be technologically literate, responsive to their personal interests, and constantly generating fresh content. This is a formidable challenge for most non-profit arts organizations, which are neither organizationally nor financially structured to allow for rapid innovation or hypersensitivity to consumer expectations.
>
> AEA Consulting, 2006, 9

Yet, if museums are to survive, they must re-invent themselves, find cheaper ways of doing this rather than pandering to the commercial design industry and stop defining what they think they can achieve on the basis of existing job titles and staff structures. Flexibility and an ability to respond quickly and effectively as audiences change is the key to the future. The alternative is that audiences will continue to say they have 'done' the museum and do not need to go back.

Conclusion

> Cultural producers that are able and willing to adjust to changing conditions are succeeding, those that can't or won't are becoming obsolete.
>
> AEA Consulting, 2006, 5

I am seriously concerned that much of the museum profession is sleepwalking towards oblivion. Too many museums need a root and branch transformation – of attitude, ethos and practice – to establish their relevance to 21st century audiences. Most have noticed the extent to which their world and clientele are changing, but continue to do little about it. They are comfortable in dealing with the past but seem to find their own present and future much more difficult. The issue is not a lack of vision, or of clarity of purpose. Rather it is inertia that prevents them moving forwards. The causes of that inertia are myriad. Out-of-date mindsets create an unwillingness to face up to the need for change. Weak and inexpert leadership leads to uncertainty of purpose. Many have staff structures, expertise and collections geared to another age. And many also have very high overheads necessitated by the need to maintain expensive historic buildings and collections. Finally comes the threat and reality of severe budget cuts where survival dominates. So we see museums which know they must define and adapt to their future roles yet remain vague, at best, about how to do this. And if they fail to transform themselves, they will die.

The pressures on museums to change are both disruptive and incremental, outlined in box 2. Despite the attention paid in recent years to the social role of museums, the direction of museums has been driven on the whole by disruptive change. In the UK, this has been particularly the case since the financial crisis of 2007/08. Yet the most important issue for museums is the constantly evolving nature of society. To sustain audiences, museums must be much more responsive to the continually developing expectations of their potential audiences.

Box 2: DISRUPTIVE and INCREMENTAL change

<u>**Disruptive**</u>

New government agendas and legislation

Economic crises

Security issues

<u>**Incremental**</u>

Growth of professional classes

Improving educational standards

Increasing personal wealth

Increasing leisure time (including paid holiday entitlement)

Merging of high and popular culture

Democratisation of travel

Spread of television and internet

Globalisation

Generational shift

Increasing diversity of western populations

Impact of new media – expectations of participation

Blurring of boundaries – e.g. freestanding museum may become as antiquated as a single-purpose phone

My strong view is that the primary functions of museums remain unchanged, and are as relevant as ever – to act as cultural memory stores for humankind and to seek to engage people with their collections in ways that will both inspire and enhance their knowledge and understanding of themselves and of the world they inhabit. Performing these functions can

also promote health and well-being, and stimulate community pride, understanding and involvement. Crucially, these latter roles may successfully bring in new, previously marginalised, audiences. But these new audiences complement rather than replace core museum visitors – the well-educated professionals on whom museums will continue to depend.

To survive other than in tourist destinations, museums must convince more of the core audiences in their localities of their relevance, and of their ability to support meaningful experiences based around active participation. This will not be easy. As this article shows, museums have consistently underperformed in their capacity to attract what should be those core audiences, and the situation is getting worse - to the extent that the future of many museums in Western society is being put at risk.

One can confidently predict that most of the big museums in major tourist locations will survive for the foreseeable future, even thrive. There were 43 museums in the UK in 1999 attracting over 250,000 visitors each, responsible for 43.2% of all museum visits. Of these, eleven museums in London were responsible for 26.2%, a figure I believe would be much higher now (Law, 2002: 84). Many small museums, operated entirely by volunteers, will also continue as before, provided they can attract new volunteers sporadically to replace those who grow too old to continue, and raise the small sums required each year to meet overheads.

It is the large number of museums in between these two types which must either grasp the opportunities offered by the changing nature of western society or risk losing relevance within a generation. Deep down, most museums are aware of the scale of change required. A few are actively involved in the process but, for most the response to incremental change continues to be one of muddling through with piecemeal initiatives and, more recently, the installation of expensive new exhibitions, still based on old didactic principles. This is not good enough, especially when the alternative provides opportunities undreamt of by our predecessors to share our collections, enthusiasms and expertise with the world.

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